

LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
P66r
v.2

The person charging this material is responsible for its return to the library from which it was withdrawn on or before the **Latest Date** stamped below.

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University.

To renew call Telephone Center, 333-8400

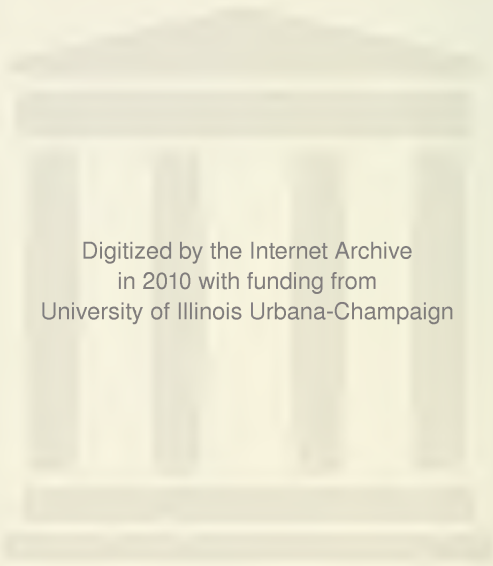
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

JUL 15 1980

FEB 1 1986

JUL 28 1989

SEP 20 1989



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

157
/

A RED SISTER

VOL. II.

A RED SISTER

A Story of Three Days and Three Months

BY

C. L. PIRKIS

AUTHOR OF "LADY LOVELACE," "A DATELESS BARGAIN," "AT THE MOMENT OF
VICTORY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY
LIMITED

St. Dunstan's House

FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET

1891

A RED SISTER.

CHAPTER I.

FOR nearly a week Lady Joan lay on her bed in a state of semi-consciousness. During that week the little village churchyard, which had already received the poor maimed and scorched collier lads, once more swung back its lych-gate to give its six feet or so of quiet earth to John Gaskell and his father.

And the country-side mourned for the two, just as they had mourned for the collier lads who were their own kith and kin.

Not a man, woman, or child far or near but what, one way or another, paid their tribute

of affection and respect. Crowds lined the road along which the funeral cortège passed, and church and churchyard were filled with mourners of every degree.

Herrick's gaze wandered in vain down the aisle for Lois's sweet face in her accustomed place in church. One look from her tender, tearful eyes he felt would say more to him than the volumes of letters of condolence of which he had been the recipient during the week, and which had seemed to go over his heart like an iron harrow as he had read them.

A flash of painful thought brought before him Lois's dependent position in a not too orderly household, a position which compelled her to make her inclinations bow to her duties. Following the thought came the sudden, angry impulse, to end as quickly as possible so intolerable a condition of things.

And then he pulled himself together

sharply, rebuking himself for thoughts which, in the circumstances, seemed a treachery to the newly-dead.

This, in some sort had been Herrick's frame of mind during the past week—a week in which the most trivial and the most momentous details of life and death had jostled and elbowed each other with hideous and jarring familiarity. Lady Joan's illness had doubled and trebled his anxieties and responsibilities. The colliery disaster and its consequences in ordinary circumstances would have claimed every minute of his time from morning till night. Now, in addition, all sorts of duties, trivial and tiresome, ponderous and sad, pressed upon him hour by hour.

One duty most unwelcome to him at the moment was that of playing host to his uncle and cousin, who arrived from Southmoor two days after his father's death.

Lord Southmoor was not a little discontented at the necessity which had driven him from his ancestral, if dilapidated, home into the mushroom grandeur of Longridge Castle.

“You can absolutely smell the wealth,” he said, turning to his daughter, as he entered the wide hall, and threw a contemptuous glance around at its sumptuous furnishing.

“Yes, I can,” she answered, with a little laugh, “as the fox did the grapes—covetously.”

“She enters the house of death with a jest,” thought Herrick, as he advanced to meet her, reading her manner easily enough, though he was out of ear-shot of her words.

He was not prepared to give these relatives of his a very warm welcome; he needed no telling of the light in which the Earl regarded his father and grandfather. He had not seen

any of his mother's people since his early college days, and the impression they had left upon his mind then was renewed now.

"He is an effeminate counterpart of my mother," was his terse summing-up of the Earl—using the adjective advisedly.

And "She is the most self-assertive young woman I have ever met," was his equally terse summing-up of his cousin; which speech on Herrick's lips meant a great deal, for, of all objectional types of womanhood, the self-assertive was to him the most objectionable.

There was no gainsaying the fact, however. The Lady Honor's appearance alone justified the epithet.

To begin with, her hair was the brightest red in tint—one seemed to see it before anything else as she entered a room. It was not the "rich ripe red" which artists love to paint, and poets to sing, but of that very

violent hue commonly dubbed "carrots." Her eyes were red-brown, round and prominent, with a fixed look in them; her mouth was large, showing large white teeth; her nose was short, her cheek-bones high. In figure she was plump, and fairly tall, with large hands and feet. Her voice matched her appearance—it was loud and ringing—and her manner was frank and a trifle domineering.

During the first day of her arrival, it seemed to Herrick that it was with great difficulty she subdued herself to a frame of mind suitable to a house of mourning and woe. Yet she did her best to be sympathetic.

"Poor Aunt Jo! No wonder she's cut up!" she said, more than once, when she was told of Lady Joan's illness.

Herrick stared at her.

"Aunt Jo!" "Cut up!"

Was it possible that the girl could be

speaking of his mother, lying unconscious on her bed upstairs with her life well nigh beaten out of her with sorrow !

He made no reply, but mentally thanked Heaven that his Lois was not like this abrupt, loud-voiced damsel. He furthermore resolved that cousin though she might be, he would see as little as possible of her during her stay in the house—a task of no difficulty this with the thousand and one matters that claimed his attention from morning till night.

Even on the solemn day of the double funeral, five minutes of quiet and seclusion seemed to be begrudged him.

Weary and dispirited, he had gone to his “den” seeking a respite from sad thoughts by penning a few lines to Lois. But his pen could not put into words how he hungered and thirsted for his darling, or with what passionate desire he longed to feel once more

the touch of her soft hand on his hair, and to hear her sweet voice saying : “ My poor, poor boy ! If only I could bear this for you ! ” So he wisely determined that his words should be few ; just as many, in fact, as would tell her that he would be with her on the morrow immediately after breakfast, and bid her, at all cost secure an uninterrupted half-hour for their talk.

But his words, few as they were, were not to be written in peace. The inevitable rap-rap—which betokened business—came to his door. Into the mists vanished sweet Lois’s dimpled face, and in its stead there stood confronting him the round head and clean-shaven chin of Mr. McGowan, the representative of the firm which, for over fifty years, had conducted the legal business of the Gaskell family.

With a profusion of apologies Mr. McGowan

introduced the purport of his visit: when would Mr. Gaskell be able to give him a morning for the discussion of the arrangement of important business details respecting the valuation of the estate?

“Valuation!” Herrick repeated the words blankly. “I’m afraid I’m all at sea.”

“I suppose there is no will,” said the lawyer, beginning to fear that young Mr. Gaskell was not half so good a man of business as his father had been before him.

“Will! No, there could be no sense in making one so long as my grandfather lived.”

“It’s most unfortunate that things should have happened as they have. The absence of a will so greatly complicates matters,” said the lawyer.

Herrick drew a long breath.

“Forgive me; I’m beginning to understand. My head is not quite clear for this

matter just now. Whenever it has come into my mind I have always taken it for granted that things would go on the same as before."

He sighed wearily. An endless vista of intricate law business seemed to open before his mind's eye now.

"If Mr. Gaskell could have foreseen such an emergency as this, no doubt he would have made preparation for it. It might be as well to ask Lady Joan if she knows of any document—will it could hardly be called—of her husband's drawing up," said the lawyer.

"My mother insists on getting up, if only for a few hours, to-morrow; but I shall scarcely like, yet awhile, to trouble her on this matter," said Herrick. "Any such document would, I should say, as a matter of course, have been deposited with you."

"I have been close upon twenty years in the firm now," said Mr. McGowan, "and

assuredly it has not been deposited with us in my time: but search shall be made in the Gaskell safe in my strong-room. The papers have been accumulating there rapidly of late years."

And with this testimony to the increased and increasing wealth of the Gaskell family, the lawyer departed, leaving Herrick free to conjure up the image of sweet Lois once more.

CHAPTER II.

IF, as the poet bids us to do, we counted time "by heart-throbs," some of us would out-live Methuselah in less than a fortnight. Lady Joan stood once more at her boudoir window, asking herself vaguely, dreamily, if creation could be only older by seven days since she had last looked out on that little glade, with its copse of hazel and wild plum. Was it only seven days since she sank back on her pillows, with all sorts of hideous voices ringing in her ears, and all sorts of unknown terrors knocking at her heart? Yet so it was. Seven days had been time and enough to spare to drag this woman through a burning fiery furnace of

delirious terror ; time enough and to spare to confront her with actual facts, and possible consequences, beside which the fiery furnace of her delirium seemed like a heavenly vision ; time enough and to spare for her to learn the terrible lesson that what was past was past, and no power, human or divine, could undo it ; time enough to set the iron of those three little words, “ no going back,” eating into her very soul.

Yet from her own lips no human being would ever hear the story of those seven days. Those about her no doubt would sooner or later remark that “ my lady had sadly changed since her illness.” Parsons, by-and-by when she goes for a week’s holiday to her married nephew, will, in the sanctity of the little parlour behind the grocer’s shop, let fall mysterious hints as to the strange language “ my lady ” used when her fever was at its

height. "She cursed her soul, did my lady," the old body will say, "she declared herself shut out of Heaven, poor dear ; but it's my belief that one half of it was the chloroform the doctors are so fond of giving nowadays." But on Lady Joan's own lips would be set a seal of silence, never to be broken in this world.

Herrick, during that seven days' illness had on the whole seen but little of his mother. For some unaccountable reason his presence in her room had seemed to disturb her, so he had wisely curtailed his visits to her as much as possible.

On the first day of her sitting up, when he went in to wish her "good morning," he started back aghast at the change which a few days had wrought in her.

"This was not my mother a week ago," he thought, with a twinge of pain ; " a week ago her hair was as brown as mine, now it is as

white as snow ! A week ago she—ah ! What is it ? Wherein is the change ? ” He abruptly cut short his wonderings, saying to himself that it was the white hair surmounted by the conventional widow’s cap, which made her look so unlike herself ; for in his heart lurked a coward dread of raising once more the spectre of that hideous suspicion of her wavering reason, which he had done his best to put to rest.

Herrick and his mother were not given to much outward demonstration of affection ; but he kissed her this morning with a warmth unusual with him, and said how glad he was to find her better. Then he delivered a message—considerably curtailed from its original prosy stiffness—from Lord Southmoor much to the same effect ; and a second greeting from Lady Honor—this, a not too literal translation from its original, free-and-easy heartiness.

Lastly, he had something to say on his own

account: he was going over to Summerhill that morning, and he asked if she had any message to give him for Lois. This was the manner in which, after due consideration, he chose to convey to her the intimation that Lois's position as his future wife must henceforward be formally acknowledged.

Lady Joan frowned; her manner grew frigid. Her reply was two words:

“None whatever.”

Then she turned her face away from him, and steadily looked out upon the September landscape.

The long drought and subsequent heavy rains had brought autumn upon them early. Damp, rotting leaves lay in bushels under the park trees; the flowers in the parterre, immediately below the windows, looked beaten and draggled. Overhead there was no glorious burning expanse of blue, but an even spread

of silver-grey, here and there browned to a tarnished silver by struggling sunshine.

“To everything there is a season,” thought Lady Joan. “Now the time to die is coming. This is as it should be. If leaves hang too long upon a tree, driving rain or hurrying winds sweep them away; otherwise what would become of the spring greenery?”

Herrick stood for a moment looking at her a little sorrowfully, a little wistfully. His heart yearned to comfort her in her sorrow. Why would she not let him? Why would she insist on building up this wall of ice between them? Why did she not turn her head, and modify, if not retract, her heartless words?

But her eyes, still steadily fixed on the misty park, with its rotting leaves, seemed to betoken that she had almost forgotten his presence.

“Just as it should be,” her thoughts ran.

“In Nature there is the autumn mist and hurrying wind, which put an end to the things whose course is run ; among men there are the strong souls who stand out here and there in a generation and say ‘ this or that life is useless, and must be blotted out.’ ”

But Herrick had grown tired of waiting.

“ No message did you say, mother ? ” he asked, a little impatiently.

“ None whatever.”

He would not invite the ungracious words to be said a third time, so he hastily left the room.

Half-way downstairs, a rush of skirts, a scamper, and a stumble told him that his cousin was behind him, and was coming downstairs, as he had heard her more than once before, a succession of small jumps.

“ Herrick ! Herrick ! ” she shouted. “ Stop a minute. How is Aunt Jo ? And what are you going to do with yourself this morning ? ”

Aunt Jo again ! It seemed as apt a designation for Lady Joan as Betsy might have been for Lady Macbeth !

Herrick drew back into a recess, to allow his cousin to pass down the stairs before him.

“ My mother is better, thank you. I hope in a day or two she will be quite herself again, and able to entertain you.”

Lady Honor swooped down the stairs in front of him. On the bottom step she caught her foot, and fell forward headlong on top of Herrick’s big mastiff, who couched there, waiting to accompany his master on the ride which he scented in the air.

There ensued profuse apologies. to the mastiff, diversified by frank little speeches addressed to Herrick.

“ Did she hurt its little paw then ! ”—the “ little paw ” was about the size of a lioness’s—“ she’s in a bad frame of mind, Argus—been

kept indoors for days, and doesn't know what to do with herself." Then to Herrick: "Some one must take charge of me to-day, or something dreadful will happen." Then to Argus: "He'd ask me to go out riding with him if he only knew how I long for a scamper." Then to Herrick: "I won't answer for the consequences if I'm again left to my own devices till dinner-time."

Her frank, easy manner almost—not quite—precluded the idea that flirtation was intended. Although Lady Joan had never in so many words expressed her wishes concerning her niece to Herrick, the idea, so to speak, had been "in the air," and he had caught scent of it. Honor, it was just possible, might be of one mind with Lady Joan on this matter. It was not a thought he liked to entertain; but there it was, and he could not help it.

So he said, a little formally, perhaps:

“I’m very sorry, Honor, that I can’t ask you to accompany me this morning; some other time I shall be delighted.”

“And I’m verry sory, too,” said Honor, in the same frank tone as before; “because, as I told you, mischief will come of it if I’m shut in here the whole morning with myself to entertain myself. I shall have to look up Aunt Jo——”

“No, no,” interrupted Herrick, “don’t do that! I mean my mother is not well enough yet to—to——”

“To stand my noise and chatter, I suppose you mean, only you’re too polite to say so. Well, then, since I may not do that, will you be good enough to tell me what I may do by way of diversion while you’re enjoying your canter this morning?”

Herrick’s face showed his annoyance. Diversion! If she wanted diversion why had she come to a house of mourners? Music, of

course, was out of the question, or he would have referred her to the music-room with its variety of instruments. Riding, unless some sober-minded person could be found to ride alongside of her, he did not care to suggest, as well for her own sake as for that of the animal she might ride.

“What is your father going to do this morning? He might perhaps like to ride or drive. You have only to give your orders, you know,” he said, after a moment’s pause.

“That’s a delightful phrase! It suggests Aladdin and the genius of the lamp at once! But of course you said it ironically! My father, at the present moment, thinks he is reading in the library. That is to say, he has chosen——no, the butler and two footmen have chosen for him—he has had all three in attendance on him ever since breakfast. Well, these three individuals have selected for him

the most comfortable chair in the library, and one of the three has cut all the papers for him, another has placed a table for him, a third has fetched him half-a-dozen books; and at the present moment his legs are crossed, he is leaning back in his chair with a newspaper on his knee, and his eyes half-shut. In that beatific attitude he has requested me to allow him to remain undisturbed."

After this fine flow of words, delivered in as short a space of time as possible, Honor drew a long breath.

Herrick, in spite of himself, felt amused. No, she could not be a flirt! But still, he thanked Heaven that Lois was as unlike her as one woman could well be to another.

"Well," resumed Honor, waiting for him to speak, "what are you going to give me to do? I warn you if you leave me to my own devices, the family name will suffer at my hands. I

shall either spend the morning in the stables with the dear horses, or I shall go down into the kitchen and help the scullery-maid, or I shall flirt with one of the footmen——”

“Good Heavens!” interrupted Herrick, more than half in earnest. “You ought to be locked in your own room, and be only allowed out on parole! Have you no letters to write? I thought girls always had any number of ‘special correspondents’ to whom they indited volumes every morning?”

Honor’s cheeks suddenly grew as nearly as possible the colour of her hair. For some unexplained reason she appeared to be unwilling to continue the conversation.

“An idea has suddenly come to me! Adieu! I see you are in a hurry to be off,” she said, hurriedly, then kissed her fingers to him, and was gone.

CHAPTER III.

THE poet who wrote that "Coming events cast their shadows before," gets a flat denial given him at every turn of life's path. This was how Herrick rode forth to Summerhill that morning: depressed, it is true, by mournful memories, solemn with the sense of the responsibilities suddenly laid upon his shoulders, yet withal daring to be joyful in spirit whenever his thoughts turned to Lois and her great love for him.

And this was how he rode back to the Castle, after a brief ten minutes' interview with Mrs. Leyton: sadness and seriousness gone together with his joyfulness, his brain one whirling chaos of anger and gloomy fore-

bodings, the future as much a blank to him as for the nonce the past had become.

His interview with Mrs. Leyton had been as stormy as it had been brief. He had had to wait close upon half an hour before the lady made her appearance, and then she had received him in her robe-de-chambre in her boudoir.

He had lost no time in preliminaries. "The butler tells me Miss White is not here! How is this, Mrs. Leyton? Please explain," he had said as he shook hands.

Whereupon, the little lady had drawn herself up haughtily, and had said: "It is to me, not you, I think that explanations are due."

"I don't understand! Am I dreaming?" Herrick had exclaimed. "Miss White returned here from the Castle, did she not, early on Friday morning last week?"

“Yes,” Mrs. Leyton had replied, “and early on Friday morning last week, Miss White thought fit to pack her box, desire one of my grooms to take it to the Wrexford station, and depart, leaving with one of my maids the exceedingly polite message, that ‘circumstances compelled her immediate departure,’ nothing more.”

“Why in Heaven’s name, Mrs. Leyton, did you not send round to me?” Herrick had exclaimed, hotly.

“Why in Heaven’s name should I have taken the trouble to do such a thing?” the lady had replied, tartly. “I concluded that it was at your instigation that the young lady was behaving in such an extraordinary fashion. You had spoken to me about your wish for her to stay with certain friends of yours till your marriage. I took it for granted that neither you nor she considered farther explana-

tion to me necessary. I said to my husband, 'This is the polite fashion in which things are generally done at Longridge Castle.' "

The slightly sarcastic tone in which the last words had been spoken, had showed that Mrs. Leyton had neither forgotten nor forgiven the one or two snubs which Lady Joan had dealt her.

Herrick had grown more and more bewildered and distracted. He put a hundred wild and disconnected questions to Mrs. Leyton, which her first words had already sufficiently answered. Had she enquired at Wrexford station, as to Miss White's destination, had she cross-questioned her groom, the maid-servants, also, rigorously ?

To all which Mrs. Leyton had replied, sarcastically still, that in the circumstances she had not thought it necessary to do so, but that if he had any wish to cross-question either the

men-servants, or the maids, he was at perfect liberty to do so. And furthermore, in order to avoid embarrassment of any sort to questioned or questioner, she had forthwith wished him "good morning," and had left the room.

As a parting word, the lady had expressed her conviction that to her way of thinking Mr. Gaskell need be under no apprehensions respecting Miss White's safety or comfort. She herself had paid her her half-yearly salary only the week before, and there was every likelihood, she opined, that the young lady had, for the present, at any rate, taken refuge in the big orphanage, whence she had recently emerged—St. Margaret's—in the environs of Croydon.

The opportunity of bringing Lady Joan's pride into the dust gone, the lady showed an evident disposition to wash her hands of the

Gaskell family, whence so many affronts to her social standing had emanated.

Herrick's cross-questioning of Mrs. Leyton's servants threw little or no further light on the matter. None of the maids had seen Miss White on the morning in question, except the nurse; she stated that at about six o'clock, or half-past, Miss White had come into the nursery with her hat and veil on, and had kissed the children as they lay asleep in their beds. Her impression was, that Miss White was returning to the Castle to stay, and this impression was confirmed by the sound of tears in the young lady's voice, which in the circumstances seemed natural enough.

The groom had even less to tell. He merely stated that Miss White had come to him and asked him at once to take her box to Wrex-ford station in the luggage-cart, and he had done so. On arriving at the station he had

deposited the box in the cloak-room according to his orders, but the young lady was nowhere to be seen. This was all that Herrick could elicit from the servants.

On leaving the house, however, just as he was bringing his horse to a trot through the Park, the sound of hurried footsteps and his name called made him draw rein and look round.

A young girl, the under nurse as he supposed, came up breathlessly with a letter in her hand. "For you, sir," she said, "Miss White left it in my hands when she went away. 'I can trust you, Rhoda,' she said, 'it is to be given into Mr. Gaskell's own hand—no one else's—when he comes to the house, but not before.'"

Herrick snatched the letter from the girl, in his eagerness forgetting the fee with which she no doubt expected to be recompensed.

The note, written in a hasty, scrambling hand, was very brief, and ran thus :

“Only a few lines to say good-bye to you. I have felt from the very first that our engagement was a mistake ; I am thoroughly convinced now that a marriage between us could bring no happiness. Do not be uneasy as to my future ; I am going at once to friends who will protect and advise me. I beg, I implore you make no effort to follow me and find out my hiding-place. Let me, I entreat you, at once and for ever pass out of your life. Believe me, it will be as much for my good as for yours that I should do so. God bless you.

“LOIS.”

The letter needed no second reading ; its straightforward plainness made it easy enough to understand. The fears and misgivings which he had argued away—scolded away—

kissed away—had once more taken possession of her; and, yielding completely to them, she had taken sudden flight. But whither. Who were these friends of whom she spoke so confidently? He knew, or he thought he knew, every friend she had ever had. They could be counted on the fingers of one hand—a girl at the big orphanage, a young teacher there who had been kind to her, a cousin of her father's in America, who at one time used to send her Christmas-boxes, and all were told. Who then were these newly-found friends in whom she placed such implicit confidence?

A great wave of jealousy for a moment swept over him that his Lois should flee for refuge to other guardianship than his; it faded, giving place to a darker thought, an ugly suspicion lest this sudden impulsive flight might have been suggested by an older and warier brain than hers. His mother from the

first had opposed his choice of a wife ; what if she had found opportunity to work on the girl's unselfish misgivings, and had not only suggested this sudden flight of hers, but had supplied her with means to make it, and had found for her a hiding-place at the end of it !

He touched his horse with his whip. Well, thank Heaven that doubt at least could be decided at once by a question and answer. All his pity, all his respect for his mother for one brief moment seemed engulfed and gone. "She has had her own choice, she has made her own life, why in Heaven's name does she seek to mar mine for me?" was his thought as he sped swiftly along under the Summerhill beeches, which dropped now and again a rough little coffin of a nut into his horse's glossy mane, now and again a damp, blurred leaf.

Only once did he turn his head on his way through the Park. That was to give

a rueful glance to the spot where, with light heart and lighter words, he had helped Lois to make her miniature Adonis garden. A few limp, battered flower-stalks, a handful of mud-spattered petals, was all that was left of it now.

CHAPTER IV.

“MOTHER, do you know anything of this?” asked Herrick, standing, white and wrathful before Lady Joan, with Lois’s scrap of a letter in his hand.

Lady Joan had quitted her chair beside the window, and was seated now at her writing-table addressing an envelope. Before she looked up in response to Herrick’s question, she carefully reversed her envelope on her blotting-pad.

Lady Joan’s troubles were to come now all together it seemed. Not a quarter of an hour ago a momentous piece of intelligence had

been communicated to her, and here was Herrick confronting her with such a question as this !

The momentous piece of news had been told her by Parsons in response to her order for Lucy Harwood's immediate attendance, and was to the effect that, nearly a week ago, Lucy had been fetched away by her brother, who evidently considered that she had received her dismissal. Upon hearing this, Lady Joan had at once taken pen in hand, and had written a note to Lucy's brother, requesting him to come and see her immediately.

It was the envelope of this letter that she was addressing when Herrick entered the room.

He had to repeat his question.

Then Lady Joan looked up, and said slowly, as if doing her best to gather together her forces to meet a new difficulty or danger :

“What is ‘this’? I do not understand? What is it I am supposed to know?”

For answer, Herrick spread Lois’s letter before her, and bade her read it.

Though he stood there closely watching her face as she did so, never so much as a change of colour showed her surprise and sense of relief that the young girl had so literally fulfilled the few short and somewhat indefinite instructions that she had given her.

She took long to read the few simple lines. He grew impatient.

“Have I to thank you for this?” he asked, hotly, forgetting all his former kindly thought for her, forgetting everything, in fact, in his eager haste to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Lady Joan looked up at him. A slight flush passed over her pale face.

"Directly, no," she answered, with great deliberation; "indirectly, perhaps, yes. I have made no secret to her, to you, to anyone of my disapproval of your choice of a wife."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"You can throw no light whatever on this hurried, ill-advised step of hers?" he asked in a restrained voice, desirous to bring her back to the main point.

"None whatever."

Still he was not satisfied.

"It was not in the first instance suggested to her by you?" he questioned, recollecting the two opportunities that Lady Joan had had of private conversation with Lois.

Now, surely it could not have been from any refinement of the moral sense that Lady Joan hesitated to speak the glib lie that would have set this matter at rest, but rather through the habit of obedience to the maxim,

"noblesse oblige," which figured to her in guise of moral code.

She rose with great dignity from her chair and stood facing him, with her head thrown back, her nostrils dilating.

"Am I to sit here and be cross-questioned by you as if I were a school-girl coining fibs to meet an emergency?" she asked haughtily. "I have told you already that, if you please, you may connect me indirectly with this young lady's extraordinary conduct. I shall reply to no more questions on the matter."

It was possible that if Lady Joan's mind had not already been greatly disturbed by what to her was a matter of greater moment, she would have adopted a more conciliatory attitude. As it was, in default of settled plan, she merely followed the dictates of inclination and instinct.

Herrick was cut off from the possibility of a

reply by the door suddenly opening, and Lady Honor entering the room.

She had in her hand a plate with a magnificent bunch of grapes upon it. She had not, since her arrival at the Castle seen or spoken with Lady Joan, and assuredly could scarcely have selected a more inopportune moment for paying her first visit to her aunt's room ; she looked from Herrick to Lady Joan, from Lady Joan to Herrick.

“They told me you had come down,” she said, addressing her aunt. “And though Herrick told me not to go near you to-day, I didn't see why I should not. I've been through the grape-houses and picked out the finest bunch I could find for you. Now, you'll devour every one of them, won't you, Aunt Jo—an ?”

The last syllable of Lady Joan's name was evidently added as an after-thought. The

young lady made this speech somewhat in the manner in which she generally chose to come downstairs—in successive jumps.

Before she was half-way through it, Herrick, with an exclamation of annoyance at the interruption, left the room.

Yet if he had stayed for an hour questioning and cross-questioning his mother, he said to himself after a moment's thought, he did not see what he could have gained by it. Lady Joan's manner carried conviction to his mind that she was utterly in ignorance of Lois's movements, and as unprepared as he was for her sudden flight. One thing seemed clear to him; he must go at once, without a moment's delay, to the big orphanage in the vicinity of Croydon, where, as Mrs. Leyton had suggested, tidings of Lois, if not she herself, might be found.

It was easy for him to say "without a

moment's delay," it was not so easy for him to put his intention into execution.

First, there came a telegram from Mr. McGowan, asking when he could see him on an urgent and important matter.

Herrick's reply to this was the somewhat vague one: "When I return from London."

Following this, came a request from Mr. Champneys, the manager of the Wrexford mines, that he might see Mr. Gaskell on matters of business. Now an interview with Mr. Champneys "on matters of business" meant at least an hour's work, at most an afternoon's.

Herrick thought awhile, then he looked at his watch. With the utmost despatch there was no saving a train from Wrexford for London before five in the afternoon. So then, with a terrible misgiving as to what might be the consequences of this enforced delay, the

young man beat down his burning impatience to be off—going—doing something somewhere—and forced himself to sit still for an hour and a half without a break, listening to the driest business details, and giving in return the most methodical of instructions.

As he crossed the hall on his way out of the house a sheet of paper lying on the floor caught his eye; it had evidently fluttered from a small portfolio which lay on a table, and which he recognised as his cousin's.

Mechanically he picked up the paper, intending to replace it; as he did so the pencil sketch on it caught his eye. It was done with a bold, free touch, and represented the interior of a boudoir—his mother's, was it? Yes; there was the old Earl's portrait over the mantelpiece, and the two full-length figures which faced each other, one either side of the table, were—good Heavens! who

were they? That young man with his head thrown back and his fingers clenched into the palm of his hand was evidently meant for him, but it had his mother's face, crowned with its widow's cap, given to it! And that tall, stately lady, with her head thrown back and hand outstretched, was endowed with his own moustached visage, and hair cut "*à la militaire*." The words beneath the sketch, in Honor's big writing, "Which is which?" made it plain that the young lady possessed the gifts, doubly dangerous when conjoined, of caricaturist and satirist.

Herrick laid down the sketch, ashamed of himself for the feeling of annoyance which so trivial a matter had raised in his mind.

Had he been forced to speak out all his thoughts, he would have confessed that the real sting of the thing lay, not alone in the fact that a moment so tragic to him had been

made material for a jest, but also in the vividness of the likeness between his mother and himself, which, with an artist's eye, the girl had seized and emphasized.

Why or wherefore, however, this should be a cause of annoyance to him, he might have found it hard to say.

CHAPTER V.

HERRICK was away two days in London ; he might just as well have stayed at home for all the news of Lois that he brought back with him. The principal of the big orphanage at which the young girl had been educated heard with amazement of her disappearance. She immediately cross-questioned the teachers and pupils of the establishment, with whom Lois was in the habit of corresponding, but with no result. Herrick was sent on a wild-goose chase to the other side of London, by one of the teachers, to the house of an ex-pupil with whom she thought Lois was on intimate terms. Thence he was sent down into Hertfordshire by the ex-pupil to another ex-pupil, married and

settled down as a vicar's wife. But always with the same result. One and all averred that Lois's letters had been infrequent of late, and were absolutely destitute of details respecting herself and her doings. The only scrap of information likely to be of the smallest use which Herrick brought back with him, was the name of the distant cousin, who had from time to time sent Lois a present of a five-pound note as a Christmas-box. But even this sadly lacked individuality. "John White" is not a very distinctive appellation. The address matched the name in vagueness, and ran simply thus :

"TACOMA,
U.S.A."

These three words and three initials were all that Herrick had to show for his two days of harass and hard work.

A cablegram to so indefinite a personality

as John White of Tacoma was not to be thought of—there might be a score of John Whites in Tacoma, for aught Herrick knew to the contrary. Only one thing remained now to be done, he said to himself, as with a white face with an ugly frown on it he locked himself in his “den,” and pushed helter-skelter the accumulated letters of two days into a drawer, and that was to set off for America at once; find out John White, of Tacoma; and see if he had received any information of Lois’s intention of making her home with him! “Stand on one side now, mother, home, friends, responsibilities great and small, till I get my darling back again,” was the thought of his heart.

During the two days of Herrick’s absence Lady Joan had shaken off her convalescence, and had gone about the house as of old. Yet not altogether as of old; her duties, which for-

merly she had discharged in light, indifferent fashion, were now emphasized and made much of. Indeed, to speak exactly, occupation of some sort or another appeared to be a necessity to her, and she seemed now to shun leisure as at one time she had seemed to court it.

Even Lord Southmoor, feeble of observation though he was, had his attention attracted by what he considered a remarkable trait in her character.

“It makes my head whirl to look at you, Joan ; you seem to be always seeing people or writing letters,” he said in a tone of feeble remonstrance, as if he feared that the family dignity was about to suffer injury at her hands.

Lord Southmoor as a rule was not apt or aphoristic in his remarks. In conversation he generally sat staring hard and frowning heavily, as if all absorbed in listening. And

then he would open his lips and make a commonplace remark, or ask a question altogether wide of the subject in hand.

His remonstrance to his sister had been called forth by the fact that on the second day of Herrick's absence from home, Lady Joan had been closeted the whole morning with an entire stranger; leaving the Earl and his daughter to entertain each other.

That stranger was Ralph Harwood, who responded with as much despatch as possible to Lady Joan's summons.

Ralph had not so refined an appearance as his sister. Lady Joan quickly enough took his measure as that of a young farmer of the old school; that is to say, a man lifted above the farm-labourer class by a better education, but willing at any moment to let himself down to the level of the farm-labourer, and do farm-labourer's work, if by so doing

his land would be better tilled, and his livestock better cared for.

In type he was florid and Saxon, tall and sturdy, with hair of a darker tint than Lucy's, and eyes that had an anxious, worried look in them. He looked miserable and ill at ease as Lady Joan laid stress upon what she called his extraordinary conduct in taking his sister away in so hurried a fashion. "Where is she now," she asked; "what is she doing? She can come back to me here if she is so disposed."

"Not possible, my lady," answered Ralph; "she has been ill in bed ever since she has been at home. It's my belief——" Here he broke off abruptly, then added, a little bitterly: "What with one thing, what with another, I scarcely know which way to turn."

Lady Joan looked at him steadily for a moment. No, it was not the beggar's whine

for charity, but the real outcry of a harassed man.

She tried to lead him on to speak of his own and Lucy's early days. She began by recounting the story of the two occasions on which the girl had walked in her sleep while at Longridge.

"The first occasion she seemed to remember perfectly, and could give a clear account of," the lady went on to say, "but the second appeared to have entirely faded from her memory."

"It has been so before, my lady," said Ralph; "more than once she has got out of bed and walked about the house, and I have guided her back to her room and helped her into bed, and when the morning has come she has known nothing of what she has done. It is a terrible affliction, this habit of hers."

“In what way terrible?” asked Lady Joan, eyeing the man keenly.

A shade of embarrassment passed over his face, his manner grew less frank. “Well, my lady, she will not be able to get her own living for one thing. No lady would engage her as maid if she knew she had this habit.”

“No,” said Lady Joan, “that goes without saying. No lady would engage a girl with such an undesirable habit; but I should have thought good medical advice might do something for it, that is unless,” here she bent a scrutinising glance on Ralph, “it runs in the family.”

He flushed crimson, but said never a word. His embarrassed silence seemed to admit the fact.

“Pardon my enquiries,” pursued Lady Joan, in a kindly, condescending manner, which she

rarely adopted, but which, when assumed, never failed to make an impression on her listener. "Believe me, I am most desirous to be of service to you and to your sister, in whom already I feel deeply interested."

Then, little by little, in response to delicately-put questions and kindly expressions of sympathy, Ralph told the sorrowful story of his early years, and of his father's married life.

It was, in fact, the untold half of the tale which Lucy had already related in outline to Lady Joan.

The wife whom John Harwood, whilom butler to the Vicar of Southmoor, had married, had, after the birth of her second child, Lucy, developed symptoms of insanity. On more than one occasion she had attempted suicide, and after ineffectual endeavours to keep her safe at home, her husband had been compelled

to place her in the county lunatic asylum. Here she had remained for over fifteen years, at the end of which period she had been discharged as cured. The greater part of the time spent by her in the asylum was of necessity a blank to her, and she had returned home expecting to find her children much as she had left them. Her husband, who from time to time had visited her during her confinement in the asylum, she had recognised; but her children she had denounced as aliens and impostors, who had taken the place of the small boy and girl she had kissed and said good-bye to long ago. It had been thought advisable from the first to keep from Lucy the knowledge of her mother's insanity, lest it might have a bad effect upon her. She was a delicate child; in physique the living picture of her mother, and in temperament her very double. The child came back from an aunt

in London who had brought her up, prepared to lavish her love upon a mother who, in her fancy, figured as her ideal of everything a mother should be. The mother not only failed utterly to recognise her daughter, but in the dead of the night was detected in an attempt on the girl's life. This attempt was concealed from Lucy, who was immediately sent back to her aunt. Other symptoms of lunacy soon showed in the poor woman, and she was sent for a time to the house of a doctor in the neighbourhood, a connection of her husband's through marriage. Shortly afterwards this doctor had removed to Ireland, taking his patient with him. From time to time there had come reports of her improved state of health, and then had come the news that she had eluded his vigilance and escaped from his care. From that day forward she had never been heard of.

Her one desire and aim from morning till night had been to re-discover the tiny daughter she remembered so perfectly, and whose likeness she wore night and day in a locket round her neck. It was thought possible that she had started on this quest, and either had been overtaken by some accident, or else had committed suicide. Mr. Harwood's enquiries on the matter, Ralph admitted, had been neither searching nor prolonged, and nothing had since transpired to confirm either surmise.

The death of Lucy's aunt at this juncture had rendered it necessary for Mr. Harwood to provide another home for his daughter. Beset by the dread lest his wife might find her way back to her home and make another attempt on Lucy's life, and possibly also anxious to escape from a place of sad memories, he had sold his farm in Devon, and had purchased one near Wrexford. Then pecuniary difficulties

had begun. The Devon farm had been sold at a loss ; the Wrexford farm had had too high a price paid for it. The worthy farmer found himself crippled at every turn by want of capital. His spirits sank, his health gave way, and he died, leaving to his son an unprofitable investment, and the care of his fragile sister. Ralph had no easy life before him ; do what he would, the farm did not pay its expenses ; and Lucy's daily increasing likeness to her mother caused him daily increasing anxiety. The girl had been told that her mother was dead ; this, the conversation of some farm-labourers overheard by her proved to be false ; and henceforward every statement made to her on the matter she disbelieved. She drifted into a morbid condition of mind, and little by little developed the symptoms which her mother had developed before insanity had set in. One idea took possession

of her brain—to find the ideal mother of her childhood's love. She settled to no occupation, she wandered listlessly about the country all day, slept badly at nights, and eat next to nothing. In this extremity Ralph be-thought him of his father's early friends, and wrote an imploring letter to Mr. Vaughan Elliot.

Lady Joan raised her eyebrows.

“Mr. Vaughan Elliot!” she repeated. The name, unheard for so many years, fell strangely on her ear in this connection.

“Yes, my lady, Father Elliot that is,” said Ralph. “He had just been appointed, so I had heard, to St. Elizabeth's Church, at Long-ridge——”

“St. Elizabeth's! Here within two miles of the Castle!” interrupted Lady Joan, her surprise increasing on her.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Go on with your story,” said the lady. But though she said, “Go on,” it was easy to see that her thoughts had been set wandering.

Ralph went on.

“I wrote to him, begging him, on his way to his church, to spend a few days at our farm. He was kind enough to do so, and in three days he did Lucy more good than anybody else had ever done in as many years. He made her promise to give up her wanderings about the country in search of she knew not what, and advised that she should at once take a situation where constant occupation would be given her——” He broke off for a moment, and then added, bitterly : “And this is how it has all ended !”

Lady Joan had listened with a keener ear to Ralph’s story than she had to the other half of it as told her by Lucy.

It seemed to her that a very straightforward course lay before her now.

“It is a sad tale,” she said. “It has greatly interested me. I think, however, you ought not to lose heart, as you have done, on your sister’s account. She is very young, and, as I said before, medical treatment ought to do something for her. Now, what do you say to sending her for a time to stay at a doctor’s house—to a doctor, of course, who understands such cases—say, to the man to whom your father confided your mother?”

Once get the girl treated as the semi-lunatic she undoubtedly was, and who would believe any wild story she might tell as to what had gone on in a certain sick-room on a certain night?

Ralph shook his head.

“I haven’t the money, my lady——” he began.

“Leave that to me. What is the name of this doctor? Where is he living now?”

“His name is Gallagher, and he lives at Ballinacrae near Cork, my lady. Just now, however, he is in Liverpool, trying to arrange a troublesome lawsuit with which he is threatened.”

“Ah; no doubt he would be glad to increase his income by a lucrative patient. Is he competent, do you think, to treat such cases as your mother’s and sister’s?”

Ralph did not seem to notice the way in which she bracketed Lucy with her mother. He answered readily enough :

“Oh, thoroughly competent, my lady. He was at one time head-keeper in one of the big county asylums. Then he married my father’s cousin, who was an attendant there, and took it into his head he knew so much about lunatics that it would pay him to enter the

profession, and set up as a doctor to the insane. That was in our prosperous days, and my father, off and on, helped him a good deal with his college expenses."

"I should like to see this man," said Lady Joan, "and talk to him about your sister."

Ralph had an objection to raise which she did not expect.

"Before anything is done, my lady, I must see Father Elliot and consult him on the matter. I can do nothing without his consent."

Lady Joan frowned. Father Elliot again! Thirty years ago she had said to herself: "This man shall go at once and for ever out of my life." And lo, here was he confronting her at a crisis!

"I think," she said, with not a little asperity, "you are unwise not to avail yourself at once of my offer. It is the advice of

a doctor, not that of a priest, which you are needing for your sister."

Whatever Ralph might desire for his sister, assuredly advice from a priest was not what Lady Joan desired for her. Priests had the uncomfortable habit of counselling confession, and so of getting at a variety of matters which did not concern them.

"Give me a little time to think it over, my lady," said Ralph humbly. "I am going straight to the Father's from here; and, if you will allow me, I will call in again on my way back in the afternoon."

With so much of concession Lady Joan was obliged to be content, and to allow the man to depart.

CHAPTER VI.

ON the Castle terrace, the sun-dial, gorgeous in new bronze and sparkling granite, lengthened its shadow over the flying hours. Half-past four struck, and Lady Joan went indoors to afternoon-tea in the library. Lord Southmoor was there awaiting her. He was standing in one of the long narrow windows of the room, holding one of her delicate Sèvres tea-cups to the light.

To every man, say the artists, comes in the course of his life an inspired moment, when, if his portrait be taken, the man is seen at his best.

To see Lord Southmoor with a Greuze before him on an easel, or with a dainty bit of china

in his hand, was, so to speak, to catch him at high-water mark, and to get a glimpse of that special commodity which, in his organism, did duty for a soul. A something of intelligence would come into his eye, a something of animation into his speech, and it was possible to conceive what Lord Southmoor might have been under happier conditions, that is to say, if life could have been made "all Greuze and Dresden china" for him.

"If only I had been moulded in a pottery, and fired in an oven, I should have been appreciated," Lady Honor was in the habit of saying. "I should have been fondled, and admired, put upon a pedestal, and under a glass shade. Thank you ! I prefer my ugliness and my freedom."

He passed his finger caressingly over the teacup, as Lady Joan entered the room. "After all, there's nothing like Sèvres for tea-cups,"

he said musingly ; “ the very touch of the glaze to the lips is a pleasure.”

Lady Joan’s reply was not to be spoken, for at that moment the door was opened, and Lady Honor, followed by Argus, came in at a rush. She had evidently just returned from a ramble with the dog, who, during his master’s absence, had transferred his allegiance to her ; her hands were full of field-flowers, and a big trail of bryony decorated the mastiff’s collar.

“ Tea for one, bread and butter for two,” she said, giving the order as if she were entering a pastry-cook’s shop. Then the straw hat, which she was swinging vigorously, on one finger, came into contact with a photograph frame that stood on a small table, and the thing came down with a crash.

Honor stooped to pick it up. The action seemed to displease Lady Joan more than the accident had done.

“William will do that,” she said icily. Then her eyes rested with manifest disapproval on her niece’s ungloved hands.

Honor felt the look. “I only took them off after I had passed the lodge, Aunt Joan. See, here they are, safe in my pocket.” She pulled forth a big leather-like pair of gloves from the pocket of her coat, and held them up to view.

Lady Joan surveyed them with a critical eye. “I shall be glad, Honor, if you will allow my milliner to supply you with gloves for the future,” she said. “I have never seen gloves of that description on a lady’s hand.”

“I gave three francs for them only the day before I left Brussels,” exclaimed the girl indignantly. Then she took her tea and a plate of bread and butter into a window recess at the farther end of the room, whistling to Argus to follow.

“She has not been a widow a fortnight,

and she can think of the cut of my gloves!" said the girl to herself. "Why, if I had a husband, and he were to die, all I should pray for would be sticks enough to make a suttee fire, so that I might go up to Heaven after him as soon as possible."

From the far end of the room, fragments of the talk between her father and aunt came to her.

"I can tell, by the way his lips move, what he is saying," she thought. "He's apologising for my shortcomings. 'It's the school at Brussels, that's what it is!' Yes, there's a big 'B' coming out of his mouth. Just as if I had chosen my own school, and sent myself there! Oh, good gracious! What are they saying now!"

"I shall be delighted," the Earl was saying, "to leave Honor in your care for as long as you like to keep her—your society will be of inestimable advantage to her. I must return

in a day or so. Lily tells me her present quarters don't suit her, and I expect we shall have to get back to Cannes before the cold weather sets in."

Lady Southmoor, it may be mentioned, in passing, generally found that her "quarters didn't suit her" after about three weeks' stay in them. The pleasant little flutter caused by a removal to a fresh hotel, the inspection of new menus, and the attendance of another doctor, was the nearest approach to a diversion that she admitted into the rôle of interesting invalid, which she filled so well.

"I'm to be left behind, am I! To be pruned, and trimmed, and tortured into a second Aunt Jo? Too late in the day, good people. Now, ten years back, before my hair was quite so pronounced in colour, Aunt Jo, you might have done something with me; but not now. What, all your bread and butter gone, Argie dear?

Never mind, we'll go in for the cake, now. Ah ! who's this ? Aunt Joan, here's such a nice-looking man coming up to the house—carries himself like a soldier. No ; I think he looks more like a gardener in his Sunday clothes."

The library was at the side of the house, and, facing the window at which Honor sat was a small pine-wood. Possibly, by the time three more generations of Gaskells had been reared and had passed away, that plantation might be worth looking at. At present it was just a bit of scrubby woodland, through which a bridle-path led into the high road. From out this woodland Ralph Harwood had just emerged.

"Yes, a gardener in his Sunday clothes," Honor went on, taking up an opera-glass, and steadily scrutinizing the man ; "and, now I look at him again, I fancy I should very much prefer him in his shirt-sleeves with a spade in his hand."

“Are you addressing your conversation to me, Honor?” interrupted her father, in mild, lazy tones. “Your aunt left the room directly you announced the approaching stranger. Dear me! She seems to have a great deal on her hands just now.”

Those were the very words on Lady Joan’s lips at that moment, as she leaned forward on her writing-table, addressing Ralph, who was seated facing her on the other side.

“I have a great deal on my hands just now,” she was saying, “and I shall be glad to arrange this matter with as little delay as possible. What does your priest—Father Elliot—say to my offer?”

“He says, my lady, that he must think it over; Lucy’s future cannot be decided for her at a moment’s notice.”

Lady Joan’s face changed.

“Surely,” she exclaimed, “you could not

have made it plain to him that my offer meant the providing for life for your sister, who is so incapable of providing for herself?"

"I did, my lady, and he seemed surprised—startled I might say—when I told him who you were, and what an interest you had taken in her; but still he said he must have time to think the matter over."

Lady Joan's face grew darker still.

"Am I to understand," she asked coldly, "that you mean this priest's advice to stand in the way of your sister's undoubted advantage? I told you before it is a doctor's advice, not a priest's, she is needing. Why do you not, now that the doctor who attended your mother is so near at hand, write to him to come and see your sister? His professional opinion might carry weight with your priest."

"Oh, my lady, I'm expecting him to come every day. I owe him a good deal of money;

he'll be sure to come over and see me," answered Ralph, a little recklessly, and not a little bitterly.

"Very well then, when he comes to see you, you must let him see your sister also; and then I should like you to come here again and tell me exactly what his opinion is. I suppose you clearly understand that I am willing to pay all his fees, and whatever he chooses to charge for receiving her into his house as a patient?"

"Oh, yes, my lady; and I shan't know how to be grateful enough to you, if the Father will let me accept your offer," protested Ralph, repeating words that grated on Lady Joan's ear in a manner impossible for him to understand.

"Will you write down the name and address of this doctor," said Lady Joan, handing a pen to him, "in case I may wish to communicate with him at any future time?"

Ralph rose from his chair and took the pen,

placing his hat, which, until then, he had held in his hand, on the floor, beside the writing-table.

“Gallagher !” repeated Lady Joan, “an Irishman, of course ?”

“No, my lady,” said Ralph, as his pen slowly travelled across the paper, “his father was Irish, but he was born and brought up at Liverpool.”

Lady Joan did not hear the reply ; her eye, unconsciously following the man’s movements, had discovered a letter lying in the crown of his hat, which he had placed almost at her feet. This letter was addressed in handwriting which sent a thrill through her. Thirty years since she had last set eyes on that bold, clear hand ! Then it had conveyed to her, in glowing language, burning, passionate messages of love ; now, it merely addressed an envelope to :

MISS WHITE,

Convent of our Lady of Mercy,

Mount Clear,

near Liverpool.

For a moment she sat staring blankly at it. Here was blind chance absolutely playing into her hands and making her game easy to her!

Ralph laid down the pen. She pointed to the letter.

“You know the young lady to whom that letter is addressed?” she asked.

An expression of annoyance passed over Ralph’s face.

“Not at all, my lady. It was a letter given me to post in Wrexford by Father Elliot—I am sorry you have seen the address, I hope your ladyship will not mention it to any one. The Father gave me strict orders

not to let the letter pass out of my hands, and on no account to post it in Longridge."

Father Elliot again ! And with two of the most important threads of her life in his hand now !

"The address shall not pass my lips, I assure you," she said, with a double meaning, lost on Ralph.

For a moment there fell a silence between them, a silence which Ralph made busy with the thought of how strange it was that Lucy's two days' residence at the Castle should have aroused in this lady's mind so strong an interest in her.

Lady Joan's next words set his wonder travelling in another direction.

"Now I want to speak to you about the young lady to whom Father Elliot's letter is addressed. I know her slightly, and requested her to write to me when she left Longridge.

She has not, however, done so. Tell me, do you know what sort of a place this convent at Mount Clear is ? ”

Ralph shook his head.

“ I know nothing of the place, my lady. I could easily make enquiries about it through Father Elliot.”

“ No, don’t do that. I was only thinking——” She broke off abruptly. She had a delicate matter to handle now, and one that must not be approached in too straightforward a fashion. She leaned back in her chair for a moment, then resumed : “ I was only thinking that, as this young lady is very young, and very friendless, her inclinations might incline towards a religious life, and as I consider she has a strong vocation for it, I should be very pleased to assist her views.”

This was her manner of expressing the thought that it would be a most desirable

thing if this foolish and hysterical young person could be induced to expend her folly and hysterics in a religious channel; she was evidently designed by Nature to fill the rôle of the emotional religious recluse.

Ralph's face expressed simple, stolid astonishment. He was not quite sure that he grasped the lady's meaning; but if he had, what an amazing benevolence she was showing towards two friendless young girls!

"I don't know anything about her views, my lady," he answered, slowly. "In fact I know nothing at all about her, except that the Father gave me this letter to post, and was very anxious that no one should see it."

"Let no one see it! Tell the Father that it was quite by accident that I saw it. No doubt he has some wise reason for wishing to keep the address secret. At the same time, I want to know a little about this young lady's

doings; in fact, I have a special reason for wishing to keep my eye on her for some little time to come."

"Ye—es, my lady," said Ralph, slowly, his curiosity in the matter beginning to subside.

After all, it was no business of his what the lady's motive for wishing "to keep her eye" on this young person was.

"She is very poor," Lady Joan went on, presently, "and it occurs to me that I may possibly be of service to her. There are certain convents, I think, which expect a sum of money down before they admit a novice. Now, if this should be the case here, I should like you to make Father Elliot understand that I am anxious to assist in removing what might be a difficulty to a girl in Miss White's position in life."

"Yes, I will do so, my lady," said Ralph, rising to take his leave.

As he did so, a sudden rush of probabilities and possibilities came into Lady Joan's mind. First and foremost, there was Vaughan Elliot to be thought of. A bait to which, perhaps, ninety-nine priests out of a hundred might rise, would not tempt him—unless he had strangely altered since “the days of long ago.” She must be cautious.

“Stay a moment,” she said, arresting Ralph's departure. “Does Father Elliot, do you know, advocate conventual life for women?”

“Not in all cases, my lady. He says a nun is born, not made.”

“Quite so; I agree with him. Then before you even mention my offer to him, will you kindly find out if he considers this young lady born to the vocation; do you think you can do this for me?”

“I will try, my lady,” answered Ralph,

hesitatingly. "The Father doesn't make much of a confidant of me ; but still I'll do my best."

Lady Joan bethought her of the readiest way to ensure his "doing his best!" She took out her purse, and without preamble, handed him a bank-note. "I've already taken up a great deal of your time, which, no doubt, is of value to you, and if you act as my agent in this matter, I shall probably encroach still farther on it," she said.

"But, my lady, I've not earned so large an amount," said Ralph, gazing in amazement at the twenty-pound note, which suggested such an easy way of solving one or two of his pecuniary difficulties.

"Never mind about that," said Lady Joan, pleasantly ; "your sister, if she is ill, must be wanting all sorts of things, which, perhaps, you are not able to get for her——"

"That's true," sighed Ralph.

“And remember, I shall want to see you again in a day or two—that will mean more outlay of your valuable time.”

Ralph began a profusion of thanks. Lady Joan interrupted them.

“Now this is the sum total of what I want done,” she said. “With regard to your sister, I shall be glad if Dr. Gallagher will write to me his professional opinion of her mental and physical condition, and I shall be glad if you, on your part, will do all you can to induce Father Elliot to give his consent to her remaining for a time, at least, under Dr. Gallagher’s care.”

“Yes, my lady, I understand.”

“With regard to Miss White, I shall be glad to know what her plans are for the future. She may wish to emigrate; she may wish to do a great many things for which her resources are insufficient. Make Father Elliot

understand, please, that I wish to help forward her plans for her future, whatever they may be—whatever they may be—do you see?”

Once more Ralph protested his willingness to do the lady's bidding to the utmost of his ability. Then he took his departure, his mind holding but one thought now: gratitude for the lady's great benevolence, which could not have come at a more opportune moment.

A great golden moon was throwing gaunt shadows across the green-sward as he crossed the Park on his way back. At the lodge gate he paused, to hold it open for a white, weary-faced young man, who came riding slowly along.

“That must be young Mr. Gaskell,” he thought, as he touched his hat respectfully.

If Herrick could have known of the letter which lay hidden in that hat, he would scarcely have ridden past as he did, with a slight nod and indifferent “Good-night.”

CHAPTER VII.

It seemed as if all heaven and all earth had conspired together to retard Herrick's departure for America; as if every one and everything about him said with one voice: "See now, isn't one wild-goose chase enough? Why attempt another?"

He had no sooner got into the house, pulled off his boots in his "den," and sent a message to his mother that he would not sit down to dinner that night, than there was put into his hand a telegram from Mr. McGowan, reiterating the question he had before asked: "When can I see you on important business?"

Herrick's reply to this: "On my return

from America"—as vague and somewhat more startling than the one he had before dispatched—had the effect of bringing Mr. McGowan to the Castle before breakfast was ended on the following morning.

He entered the room with a flushed face and an air of subdued excitement, which made itself felt.

"Get him out of the room as quickly as possible, Herrick," whispered Honor, "his complexion and my hair combined would send some one crying out for the fire-engines."

Herrick complied with her request, though from a different motive.

"Champneys is waiting for me. I can only give you half an hour," he said to the lawyer, rising from the table and leading the way to the library.

But less than half that time was enough and to spare to convey the startling news that

a will made by John Gaskell, nearly thirty years ago, had been discovered in one of the strong boxes which contained the Gaskell family documents.

“The man who drew it up is dead,” said Mr. McGowan; “my father, who knew about it, is dead; the clerk, to whose charge it most probably was committed, has long since retired from the business. No doubt” — here the lawyer threw an anxious glance at Herrick — “if Mr. Gaskell ever gave it a thought he intended, when necessity arose, to render it null and void by making another will.”

“Why so?” asked Herrick, a slight annoyance showing in his tone. “Any will made by my father, depend upon it, had careful thought given to it, and was not likely to be revoked afterwards.”

For all response to Herrick’s “Why so?” the lawyer drew the will from its envelope

and read aloud to him the document which gave the whole of the vast Gaskell wealth to Lady Joan for her life, and to Herrick a certain fixed yearly income, which, side by side with this vast wealth, seemed microscopic.

Herrick listened to the last word, saying nothing. Not a muscle of his face moved. He grew a little white, that was all.

The lawyer looked up, waiting for him to speak.

“Of course,” he resumed, as Herrick still sat silent, “if old Mr. Gaskell had outlived your father this will would have been worthless. My partner and I conjecture that it was made to meet certain contingences which might—but were not likely to—arise, and that, possibly, afterwards, it was treated as so much waste paper. A court of Equity might——”

“Stop,” said Herrick, speaking now for

the first time; "let it be clearly understood that, so far as I am concerned, no litigation will arise on this matter."

His voice was perfectly steady; his manner showed little or no disquietude.

"From my knowledge of your father's character, I feel confident that, as time went on, he must have intended adding a codicil, at the very least, to this will. It is monstrous to think of all this wealth—these responsibilities I mean—being left upon a woman's shoulders," said Mr. McGowan, who had more than once been snubbed by Lady Joan, and with whom, consequently, she was no favourite.

"I see nothing monstrous in it," said Herrick, curtly, not choosing to have either father or mother discussed by the lawyer; "so far as I see, this will leaves me in very much the same position as I was in before my father died. I suppose all active responsibility in the

management of the estate will devolve upon me; only, instead of having to account to my father or grandfather, as heretofore, for my management of affairs, I shall have to be accountable to the trustees. Who did you say they were?"

"One of them is dead. The other is a Mr. John Rothsay, an old friend of your father's, a man now over seventy years of age. He will have to appoint a new trustee."

Herrick looked at his watch and rose from his chair.

"I can't give you another minute," he said. "I have to give Champneys a long morning. I have so much to arrange with him during my absence."

"Sir!" interrupted the lawyer, anxiously, "must that journey to America take place?"

"Must!" said Herrick with a grave decision; "ten thousand times over it must."

“It’s a thousand pities ! all sorts of legal formalities must be gone through, and the appointment of a new trustee is an important matter——”

“It’s no use, McGowan. The matter on which I am bent overweighs this and everything else in importance. Nay, it is of so much moment that this”—here he swept the will on one side with his hand—“counts, with me, as nothing beside it. It will be better for you to see my mother at once and acquaint her with the state of affairs. When I return I may be able to give you all my attention.”

“When you return ! Can you name a date, sir ? ”

“Impossible ! I go first to Tacoma, thence I may return, or may go on—well, Heaven only knows where.”

This unsatisfactory statement the lawyer was compelled to take as an answer, and

he reluctantly departed to seek an interview with Lady Joan.

Herrick's long morning with the manager of the Wrexford mines proved to be a very long morning indeed, for it covered the luncheon hour—represented to the two by sandwiches and sherry in the library—and extended right on to the hour of afternoon tea.

It had been a “glorious, golden autumn day”—a day one gets sometimes after a spell of bad weather; and Herrick, looking out from the library window, saw that his mother and Lady Honor had had tea brought to them under the shadow of the young pine plantation which faced that side of the house. He had not, as yet, spoken to Lady Joan of his intended journey across the Atlantic, and it seemed to him that here, with his cousin present, was an opportunity for so doing. Before a third person, there would be less

likelihood of angry speech on her part, angry retaliation on his.

Lady Honor appeared to have spent her afternoon in sketching: her easel and painting materials stood beside her. As he approached she suddenly put down her cup and saucer and took her sketch-book on her knee.

The action irritated him more than he cared to avow.

“What ridiculous posture is she putting me in now, I wonder,” he thought. And as he drew nearer, in spite of himself, his eyes wandered beyond the miniature tea-table to her sketch-book.

Argus, couchant, sat about a yard or so distant, and Argus, couchant, covered half the page of the young lady’s sketch-book, complete in outline, but with face lacking.

The girl seemed to feel Herrick’s gaze.

“I have just discovered an extraordinary

likeness between Argus and a friend of mine. I shall add the face later on," she said.

"I have had no time to speak to you yet"—said Herrick, addressing Lady Joan a little formally, and in a tone that showed he was resolute to bring an ugly subject into full view—"of the result of my journey to London. I am sorry to say it has been altogether fruitless."

"Indeed," nothing more, was her reply.

Herrick bit his lip and resumed:

"I followed every clue that could possibly be had; but I could get no definite tidings of Lois and her movements."

He waited for his mother to speak. She said nothing. So he turned to Honor, and said:

"Lois White is the young lady to whom I am engaged to be married."

“Indeed!” said Honor, and—was it possible?—in that one word she reproduced Lady Joan’s voice and intonation to the life.

Herrick tried to speak unconcernedly:

“The only thing in the shape of a clue given to me was the address of a cousin of Lois’s father, now in America. As the address is not very definite—distinctive, perhaps I should say—it would be useless to send a telegram to him. So I am starting for the place myself, to-morrow.”

Now Lady Joan showed unmistakable interest.

“You—to America—to-morrow!” she exclaimed.

“Of course. There is nothing else to be done. Do you suppose I should stay here quietly and allow my future wife to drift away from me without an effort? You don’t know me if you think that!”

“Capital !” said Lady Honor under her breath.

Lady Joan looked round at her in amazement.

“I was referring to Argie’s portrait,” said the girl, holding up the faceless sketch to view.

Lady Joan turned to Herrick :

“Of course you will do as you think best. Mr. McGowan just now, when he brought your father’s will to me, told me you were going away for a time ; but I had no idea that America was to be your destination,” she said in her ordinary tone of voice.

“Your father’s will !” Herrick stared at her with wonder. She spoke as calmly as if she were talking of the will of a man who had lived and died a century back. And he could recall much such a golden, hazy afternoon as this, not a fortnight ago, when his father had stood about a yard distant from the spot where

they now stood, and, pointing upwards to the pines, had said: "They'll be grand trees, Joan, when Herrick's children have stepped into our shoes."

Lady Joan did not seem to notice the cloud on his face.

"Mr. McGowan had a good deal to say to me," she went on in the same level tone as before; then she paused a moment before adding: "but I don't see that anything in the will he read to me will materially alter my position or yours."

This was said in a kindly, conciliatory tone. Why not? She had power in her hands now, and could afford to be conciliatory. Besides, it was a course which promised, so far as Herrick was concerned, better results than a declaration of open war.

Herrick's face showed unmistakable anger. His voice vibrated as he answered:

“It’s a matter to which I am simply incapable of given my attention at the present moment. Beside Lois and her strange unaccountable flight, I can think of nothing, not even my father’s will.”

The last words were added with sarcastic bitterness.

There fell an uncomfortable pause. Did his ears deceive him, or, did Lady Honor give a low, long whistle?

Lady Joan turned sharply towards her.

“I was calling Argus,” said the girl, coolly. Then she pushed on one side her half-finished sketch, and, as if seized by a new idea, commenced another.

Lady Joan slightly shivered, and rose from her chair.

“It gets chilly when the sun has gone. Don’t stay here too long, Honor,” she said, drawing her shawl around her.

The golden haze of evening sunshine, filtering through the young pine boughs, fell on a face so pale and wan that Herrick felt himself conscious-stricken for his momentary blaze of anger.

“It would be like her to speak coldly and feel deeply,” he thought. “Who am I to say that she is not as broken-hearted as I am?”

Aloud, he said, with real concern in his voice :

“Mother, you are not feeling so well to-day, I’m certain. Pray do not overtax your strength.”

“I am not likely to do that,” was her reply, spoken with a double meaning lost on him.

Was it likely that anything the commonplace days might bring would be too much for strength which had stood the wear and tear of

nights beyond the experience of all save the souls shut out of heaven?

Honor's society had but little attraction for Herrick, so he turned to follow his mother back to the house.

"Would you like a shawl sent out to you?" he said, by way of a farewell politeness to his cousin.

Lady Honor's acknowledgment of the politeness was a curious one. Just six blunt, straightforward words that admitted of no double interpretation:

"Herrick, what a fool you are!"

"I beg your pardon!" was his astonished exclamation.

"Oh, don't make me say it over again! To think of you starting off to America when——"

Here she suddenly broke off and sketched away faster than ever.

“Pray say right out all you have to say, Honor. Don’t let a sense of politeness stop you,” he said a little sarcastically.

“No ; that isn’t likely. Now will you mind telling me how you think *Œdipus* solved the riddle of the Sphinx ? How have all the *Œdipuses* who ever lived solved their riddles ? How was the law of gravitation discovered ; the mariners’ compass ; the steam-engine ; the uses of electricity ? ”

Herrick stared at her. Was she a lunatic, or was it possible his ears were playing tricks with him ?

Aloud he said :

“Am I supposed to answer all those questions ? It’s like a page out of the ‘Child’s Guide.’ ‘Who first carried an umbrella ? Who drank the first cup of tea in England ?’ will follow next, I suppose. Really, Honor, you’ve been to school since I have, and ought

to know these things better than I can tell you."

Honor rose from her chair and gathered together her painting materials.

"I know one thing better than you can tell me at any rate," she said bluntly, as before; "and that is, that no riddles, from that of the Sphinx downwards, would ever have been solved if people had run away from them instead of looking them full in the face. I've been sitting alone all this afternoon with Aunt Jo, and off and on I've had a good deal of her society the last two days; and I've come to the conclusion——"

Again she broke off.

"Pray, as I said before, don't let a sense of politeness deter you from finishing your sentence," said Herrick half-banteringly, but in his heart more eager to hear the conclusion she had arrived at than he cared to avow.

“As I said before, I’m not likely to ; but it’ll come better a little later on, perhaps. Meantime, I’ll give you this for a keepsake, to take to America with you, if you like.”

She handed to him a leaf hastily torn from her sketch-book ; and with a smile so frank and genial that it almost made her look handsome, she disappeared into the house.

Herrick stood still for a moment, looking down in amazement at the hastily-executed drawing. It was a rough, bold sketch, made with about a dozen strokes of a full brush. A dash of ochre represented a stretch of sandy desert, out of which a full brush of sepia had made to rise the gigantic form of the mysterious Sphinx. The face of the Sphinx had been added in lead-pencil, and—there could be no doubt about it—it owned to the aquiline features and austere expression of Lady Joan.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALTHOUGH Herrick did not find time to sit down to dinner that night; although he emphatically declined Lord Southmoor's leisurely challenge to an after-dinner game of *écarté*; though he swept half his correspondence unanswered into his portmanteau, and knew that the other half would keep him up till the small hours of the morning, yet there was one thing which he resolved should not be pushed into a corner, not even by his hot haste to catch the out-going Atlantic steamer—that was his first visit to his father's grave.

His father's grave! He seated himself at his writing-table in the quiet little room where he and his father had got through so much

real hard work together, and for a moment leaned back in his chair, pen in hand, trying to realise that those three little words had not been spoken by him under the influence of a dream, trying to realise that, in very truth, they covered an episode which would leave its scar upon him for life.

His father lying in the churchyard! It would have been far easier to believe that he had only that minute left the room, that he had but now laid down his pen as he so often had, saying: "Well, good-night, Herrick, you are thirty years younger than I am, and can stand late hours a trifle better." Why, not a fortnight ago, as they had discussed together certain matters connected with a "lock-out" in the adjoining county, he had done so. There, on the writing-table, which immediately faced the one at which he sat, was the very pen he had seen in his father's hand, and

there, too, was the piece of blotting-paper, with the impress of the firm, well-remembered writing still upon it. If the door had at that moment opened, and John Gaskell had entered, and had once more seated himself in his old place, it would have seemed the most natural thing in the world—far more natural than the thought which the young man was trying so hard to make real to himself, that on the morrow, before he started for Liverpool, whence he would embark for New York, he must go forth and visit “his father’s grave.”

Herrick once more took up his pen, and made one vigorous effort to fling himself, heart and soul, into the paper which lay spread before him on the table—a contract which a big firm of engineers had wished to conclude with the proprietors of the Wrexford mines, and over which he had promised Champneys “to run his eye.”

No use! His father's very shadow seemed to fall across the blue paper with its many items written in clerk's school-boy hand. "Item No. 1. Now what would my father have said to this?" was the thought with which he began to read that foolscap sheet, and the thought with which he laid it down. Great Heavens!—here he pushed back his chair, and began to walk impetuously up and down the room—how was he to get through his work, how, indeed, was he to get through his life without that "final word" which his father had been in the habit of speaking on every matter, great and small?

It was long past midnight, so long, indeed, that from afar there came a faint, sleepy sound of cock-crowing, and he knew that if he threw back the venetian shutters of the room, the grey of dawn would do battle with the yellow light of his lamp.

“This time to-morrow I shall have sailed,” he thought, wearily trying to fence with that other haunting thought of a dead face—a dead voice. “Now what, I wonder, will come of this journey of mine? Shall I find my darling safe and sound at the other end of it? Ah”—there it was back again—“what would my father have said of my hurried departure, and my chances of success?”

And because the thought would not be shaken off—trampled under foot—quenched, Herrick set himself steadily to face it.

Now could he fancy his father standing before him, grave and thoughtful, and saying, “Herrick, is it right, do you think, for you to cast all responsibility to the four winds, and to leave your mother at a crisis in her life, to do battle with sorrows, and unknown anxieties, while you give chase to a poor

little butterfly of a girl, who ought to have stood by your side and been comfort and strength to you?"

Could he not rather hear him in a kindlier tone, and with a softer look, saying:

"God bless you, my boy, and give you success; be true and strong, and then the weak ones will learn truth and strength from you!"

But, oddly enough, there seemed to mingle with these words the tones of another voice, a trifle loud, a trifle dominant, and as unlike John Gaskell's as voice could well be, saying:

"Herrick, what a fool you are!"

Here was a harsh and jarring note to mingle with those softer and sadder memories!

"A fool, am I!" he said, to himself, with more irritation than he could account for.

“Is it because I am true to the woman I love, and won’t acknowledge her right to throw me over, that this girl calls me a fool? Or is it—no, that can’t be possible—because the young lady thinks that I’m not setting to work in the right fashion to get my darling back, that she impugns my wisdom? Yet, what in Heaven’s name am I to do, where am I to go, if not to the only relative Lois has in the world? She tells me in her scrap of a note that she will be among friends who will protect her in the future. I know all the friends she has in England, poor child, and I have been to every one of them; now where else am I to go, what on earth am I to do, if not set off to this cousin of hers?”

Again and again he racked his brain to think if any other course lay open to him, any course that approved itself to common

sense and reason. But rack, and strain, and weary his brain as he might, none other could he see.

His lamp began to burn low, the dun-grey of early dawn began to flow in coldly, slowly through cracks and crevices in the shutters. It found its way over his portmanteau, lying packed and strapped on the floor, to the débris beside his writing-table—fragments of letters and envelopes—which told the tale of his hard work at that desk.

Among those fragments, his cousin's rough sketch of the Sphinx, torn in half, caught his eye.

He pushed it irritably on one side with his foot.

“It's not worth thinking about,” he said, aloud. “A girl of eighteen! what can she know of men and women, of the world and its ways, that she presumes to lay down the law as to what is or is not folly?”

Yet, fight against the idea as he might, he was constrained to admit that no better illustration of his mother in her present mood could be found than that of the enigmatical, impenetrable Sphinx of classic story. Yes, enigmatical was, indeed, the only word that could be applied to her conduct at the present moment. Together with the most violent demonstrations of grief—of delirious abandonment to grief—she had exhibited the extreme of coldness and self-restraint. And Honor had noted this, evidently, with eye as keen as his own. Now what if in addition to these clashing moods Honor had seen and had taken note of other things, equally matters of fact, which he had not seen or noted, and hence had made her blunt animadversion upon his folly?

When Herrick had reached this point in his thinking, his irritation against Honor

had somehow subsided. In its stead there had come to him a feeling of bewilderment, a distrustfulness of his own senses such as a man might feel who, having been gazing fixedly at what he considers a red rose, is suddenly convinced of his colour-blindness by one telling him that the flower he is staring at is as yellow as a buttercup.

He passed his hand wearily over his forehead ; his eyes ached, his head ached.

“I must get a couple of hours’ sleep,” he thought. “My head isn’t clear enough to think out these things. Physically, as well as mentally, I’m not quite up to the mark just at present.”

But harassing thoughts are not to be scared away by the sight of a pillow, like sparrows from the wheat by an old coat and hat. His dreams from beginning to end of the two hours to which he restricted his rest were a

painful réchauffé of the day's anxieties, ending with a vision of Honor, standing in front of him with Medusa's head in her hand, and saying: "Since you choose to shut your eyes and your ears, now for ever lose the use of both."

CHAPTER IX.

THE thought with which Herrick lay down to rest—of his own folly in not being able to see what he ought to see, or to hear what he ought to hear—rose up with him and went with him through the fields and lanes that, with many a wind and curve, led to Longridge village churchyard.

His road lay in an opposite direction to the bleak heath and the outskirts of the coal country. Round the village church lingered all that was left of rural pastoral life in the district. The School Board—by the strenuous efforts of the vicar—had, as yet, been kept at bay, and the children on their way to the parish schools dropped little curtseys or pulled at curly locks as Herrick went along the

village street. He beckoned to one of the curly-headed urchins to hold his horse for him while he went into the grave-yard. The church lay a little way back from the village street, and was reached by a long, narrow avenue of low-growing, solemn yews. Beneath these the autumnal mist still lingered, as if kept from rising by the heavy boughs. But beyond, on the farther side of the church, the morning sun shone resplendent from out a sky—blue, as if dyed with cobalt—on graves of all sorts and conditions of men: on low, sunken mounds, with never so much as a wooden cross to proclaim the names of their occupants; on lofty granite obelisks, like the one of which Herrick was in quest; and here and there on mossy lichen-eaten stones with scarce a trace of inscription left to them.

As Herrick quitted the avenue for this sunnier portion of “God’s acre,” he was not a

little startled by the appearance of his dog Argus, who came suddenly bounding from behind a tall tombstone, and with loud bark and exceedingly wet paws, gave him an enthusiastic greeting.

Looking in the direction whence the dog had come, his eyes were met by a greater surprise still. In a spare plot of ground, immediately facing the granite obelisk which marked the last resting-place of the Gaskells, stood an old thorn-tree, ablaze now with its own scarlet berries, and the wild luxuriance of bryony which twisted itself round about the split trunk and peeped in and out among the branches. Beneath this old tree sat a lady, in deep black, with a sketch-book upon her knee. A second glance told him that this lady was his cousin, Honor.

A sudden flush of annoyance passed over him. He had come for a quiet ten minutes

to a spot to him more hallowed than any other on earth, and here was this girl, who had called him a fool to his face, with whom in fact he had nothing in common, on the holy ground before him!

With her pencil in hand, too—the pencil which had already satirised his mother and himself! What preposterous caricature had she on hand now that she must needs come to this solemn place for inspiration? Was nothing sacred in her eyes, not even the last resting-place of her own kith and kin? Was it possible that she was making a sketch of that granite obelisk in order to introduce it effectively as a background in some ridiculous character-sketch! He checked the thought with difficulty as Lady Honor, having had his arrival announced to her by Argus, came forward to meet him with outstretched hand.

She did not pick her way over the still dewy grass — straight over everything she went. Possibly, however, this mattered little, for no doubt her skirts were already bedraggled and her boots soddened by her walk down the deeply-rutted lanes—a walk most likely accomplished in similar free and easy fashion.

“I did not know you were coming here this morning,” she said, with the fixed, straight look in her eyes habitual to her, “or else I would have stayed away.”

Herrick was more than half inclined to repeat her remark verbatim for an answer. He restrained himself, however, saying only:

“It is the only opportunity I shall have before I go. I sail this evening, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” answered Honor, hastily, and in a tone which, to his fancy, painfully recalled the one in which she had passed judgment on his lack of wisdom. “But it

did not occur to me that you would be here so early this morning, and, as I particularly wanted to make a sketch to send to a friend of mine, I came."

There was no possibility of ignoring what that sketch was. Her sketch-book, held open to dry the fresh colours, displayed to view the gaunt granite obelisk and massive iron railings which marked John Gaskell's grave.

"That friend of yours ought to be a very near and dear one to have such a sketch as that sent to him—or her," said Herrick, gravely.

"That friend of mine is a very near and dear one," said Honor, in precisely Herrick's tone of voice—if it had cost her her life this girl must indulge her habit of mimicry—"and I have sent already to that friend of mine," she resumed, "a sketch of Longridge Castle——"

“And its inhabitants?”

“Why, of course! What’s the good of a shell without its kernel? Now I want to send him the sketch of Uncle John’s grave.”

Could it be that her voice faltered over the last three words? thought Herrick, his heart for a moment softening towards his cousin.

As they had talked they had walked towards the tall obelisk, and now stood beside it on the lately-removed and replaced turf, over which, here and there, the gravel still lay in brown patches.

On the big block of granite, from which the obelisk sprang, lay a thickly-twisted wreath of wild honeysuckle and ivy. The dew still lingering here and there on the luscious flowers showed them to have been freshly gathered.

Herrick looked from the wreath to Honor, from Honor to the wreath.

She turned her head away. There could be but little doubt whose hand had laid that wreath there.

His first thought was one of surprise; his second was an ungracious one. What right had she thus to associate herself with him and his mother in love and grief for the dead? Relative, though she might be, she knew nothing of his father or grandfather, save their names; and these, no doubt, had often in her hearing been associated sneeringly with plebeian wealth and mushroom grandeur.

“It was very good of you, but——” he began, coldly.

She turned her face quickly towards him. There was a shining light like that of tears in her eyes.

“But what right had I to lay it there?” she said, finishing his sentence for him.

Herrick was silent.

“What right, indeed!” she said, speaking very fast and with an undertone of pathos which he had never heard in her voice before. “What right has such ugly duckling as I to show affection for any living soul! What presumption on my part to imagine that any one, living or dead, would be the better for my giving them a thought!”

Herrick was amazed at the depth of feeling she threw into her words. The occasion did not seem to warrant it.

“No girl with a father and mother living should speak in that fashion,” he said quietly.

Lady Honor turned and faced him.

“A father and mother!” she cried impetuously. “Shall I tell you what my father and mother think of me for having dared to come into the world a girl, and a girl, too, with an ugly face and a clumsy figure? Shall I tell you that my first recollection of my

mother is her giving an order to my nurse to keep me out of her room as much as possible? My face was a shock to her nerves, and my voice gave her a headache, she said. And 'To think that you should be a Southmoor and the last of the name,' were the words with which my father packed me off to school at Brussels, and received me back with, when I came home the other day."

Herrick was touched. He took her hand.

"You would never have heard such words as those from him," he said, pointing downwards to the newly-turned sod with its browned grass and trampled daisies.

"I know it," said Honor, releasing her hand quickly, as if such forms of sympathy were unknown to her. "When I looked at his big picture hanging in the hall, and saw his kind eyes and beautiful mouth, I said to

myself: 'If I could only have known you, how I should have loved you,' and then I felt as if I must—must do something for him; lay a wreath upon his grave; say a prayer for him." She broke off for a moment, then added: "Ah! that's why I envy the Catholics so! They can pray for their dear, dead friends as well as for their living ones."

It was all said in the girl's usual frank, impetuous, rush-ahead fashion.

Herrick stood silent, self-convicted of stupidity for not having guessed at a condition of things which seemed to him now perfectly intelligible.

She misinterpreted his silence.

"But there, I'll take the wreath away," she went on impetuously. "Why should I force my way into your holy ground?"

She bent over the railings. Herrick laid his hand upon hers.

“Pray, let it be, Honor,” he said in a low, disturbed tone. “I am very grateful to you for your kind thought of my father.”

Then there fell a silence between them ; a silence during which Herrick’s compassion for his cousin in her loveless young life grew apace. He longed to offer her sympathy, but did not know how to begin. His thoughts flew to Lois.

“How I wish you and Lois could have met!” he said, “you’d have been bound to like each other, and——”

“I’m not so sure,” interrupted Honor, quickly; “I don’t take to everybody I meet.”

Herrick froze a little.

“Everybody? No! But if you have an eye for beauty, and truth, and goodness——”

“I’m not so sure that I have,” again

interrupted Honor. "I have an eye for ugliness, and meanness, and wickedness——"

"And folly," finished Herrick, meaningly.

"And folly? Yes; when it's thrust under my very eyelids!" she answered, quite unabashed; although, the moment after she added, apologetically, "you see I've had so few opportunities of making acquaintance with what is 'beautiful, and true, and good.' As a rule, I'm more accustomed to the ugly and mean, and, therefore, recognise it more quickly."

"I think you do yourself an injustice," said Herrick, gravely. "Have you not, only a moment ago, confessed that when you looked up at my father's portrait, before anything else, you saw the kindness in his eyes——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Honor,

“I did not say ‘before anything else.’ When I first looked up at Uncle John’s portrait, ‘before anything else,’ I saw that the artist had given him a streaky complexion. It was after that I found out that he had kind eyes and a beautiful mouth.”

Herrick turned sharply away. Was nothing too sacred for ridicule in this girl’s eyes? He pulled out his watch. She did not heed the action, but went on frankly, carelessly :

“And the first time I saw you—before even I saw that you were the image of Aunt Jo, I saw that you were a slovenly writer, for you had ink under your finger-nails. Now, if I were to see your Lois, before I saw her beauty and goodness, I should find out her weak point, for of course she has a weak point?”

“Yes;” said Herrick sadly, “she has a

weak point, and it has cost me dear : she can't stand her ground and face an enemy. If she is scared, she takes refuge in flight."

"Poor child ! I would love to take care of her," said Honor, for all the world as if she were in the forties, instead of little more than a child herself. Then, after a moment's pause she said, as if struck by a sudden idea : "Herrick, I would give anything to frighten Aunt Jo nearly out of her life."

Herrick started. The idea, thus abruptly expressed, assuredly sounded oddly in its present connection. It struck a curious vein of thought. Here had Honor been little more than a week in the house, and in that short space of time had evidently made observations enough to fill a note-book. The lookers-on, sometimes, see more of a game than the players.

He hazarded a question :

“Do you mind telling me, Honor, if you have any special reason for saying this?”

“Not in the least,” she answered. “Aunt Jo seems to me to be one of those persons who are sent into the world for the whole and sole purpose of frightening the timid and weak—a sort of embodied nightmare. One look at her would be enough to set old people or children shuddering.”

Lady Honor did not know what a painful memory of an old man’s death-bed her words conjured up to Herrick’s mind. Nevertheless, he felt called upon to enter his protest against her sharp criticism.

“Kindly remember that you are talking of my mother,” he said, a little stiffly.

He laid his hand on her arm, and led her away from the grave as he spoke. To his fancy the very turf, with its trampled daisies, seemed to cry out to him :

“ Would you two dare to talk thus if he who lies beneath your feet stood there by your side ? ”

Honor assuredly did not share his sensitiveness.

“ Why, what difference can that possibly make ? ” she said bluntly. “ You may call my father or mother embodied nightmares, or embodied anything else you please, and I shan’t find fault with you. But, honestly, Herrick, I came to your house prepared to love—yes, to love Aunt Jo—you know, I have had very few people to love in my lifetime. And when I saw Uncle John’s picture, I said to myself, ‘ No one could live thirty years with that man and not be the better for it.’ And I tried to get into her room while she was so ill, but they wouldn’t let me. Then you know how I bounced in on her with a bunch of grapes—oh, I had taken such trouble

in choosing that bunch ! And what do you think she said to me after you had dashed out of the room as you did in a temper ? Not ‘ Honor, you are a darling ; ’ or ‘ How I shall enjoy them ; ’ but, ‘ Honor, I shall be glad if you will allow my maid to do your hair for you while you remain here ; it does not look as it ought to look ! ’ That was how my grapes and the offer of my affection were received ! ”

They had turned down the yew avenue as they had talked, and now stood at the church-yard gate.

The lad came forward with Herrick’s horse. He twisted the reins round his arm, and side by side the cousins walked through the quiet village street, with Argus at their heels.

Herrick’s thoughts were very busy. Lady Honor, throwing a straight look at him with her bright, prominent eyes, said, a little suddenly, a little brusquely :

“Poor Herrick! From the bottom of my heart I pity you.”

Herrick started; her outspoken sympathy struck a harsh note of contrast with a gentle voice which had whispered in his ear: “My poor, poor boy! If only I could bear this sorrow for you,” while a soft hand had tenderly caressed his hair. Yet, such as it was, it was not sympathy to be rejected.

“Thank you, Honor,” he said presently. “You don’t see me at my best just now, I’ll admit. Yesterday you called me a fool, and, honestly, trouble has come upon me so thick and fast lately, that I feel as if my brains were leaving me!”

“Oh, I didn’t mean I thought sorrow had turned your brain, I meant I thought you were a fool for the way you set to work to meet it.”

“I shall be grateful to you if you will tell me a better way of meeting my troubles,” he

answered, sadly. "If you refer specially to my trip to America in search of Lois, will you kindly tell me what better course you see open to me?"

"Staying at home," said Honor promptly. "Look here, Herrick, Aunt Jo told me a little about you and Lois. That is to say, she said you had formed an undesirable attachment for a girl beneath you in station"—here Herrick made an impatient movement with his hand—"but that, left to itself, she had no doubt that the attachment would die a natural death." Here Herrick uttered an angry exclamation.

Lady Honor went on:

"Of course, when Aunt Jo spoke of an 'undesirable attachment,' I fell in love with the girl on the spot; and I thought, 'I wonder what you have done to scare that undesirable girl away from the place.' I looked straight at her—so——"—here Honor faced Herrick

with so fixed a stare in her prominent eyes that it seemed as if they must possess the crab-like power of protruding themselves—"and Aunt Jo's eyes drooped immediately. I've done it once or twice since, and her eyes invariably droop when I stare hard at her. Now, Herrick, if *Œdipus*——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake let *Œdipus* alone!" exclaimed Herrick.

"I can't; it's a case in point. Now, it seems to me, if *Œdipus* had done as you are doing—started off on a voyage to the other side of the globe, the riddle of the Sphinx would have remained unsolved to the present day; but no doubt he stared and stared at the monster until its ugly face was stamped on his mind, and——"

"You needn't go on any further, I see what you mean," interrupted Herrick, a little sharply, for the simile pained him; "but I

assure you you are mistaken if you think my mother has had anything to do with Lois's sudden flight. I have her express assurance on the matter. I know her to be as incapable of subterfuge and petty lying as—well—as you are. No, nothing else in life suggests itself but this journey to America, and go I must."

"Go, then," said Honor, "and I will stay here at Longridge, and stare at the Sphinx for you. I rather like the idea, it turns the tables on father and Aunt Jo. They've concocted a little plan to keep me here for my benefit—I'll fall in with it for theirs."

After this, the talk between the cousins grew easy and confidential. During their walk back to the Castle, there did not fall a single five minutes of silence between them. Herrick, in glowing language, told the story of his wooing and winning of Lois White, and Honor recip-

rocated with the tale of her loveless nursery days, and the miserable school life at Brussels which had followed.

“The pupils, one and all, were ill-fed, ill-taught, and brow-beat,” was her terse summing-up of a condition of things which she had depicted vigorously in detail. “They were poor, and had no one to speak up for them. I was treated somewhat better than the rest, because I had a handle to my name, and, if I had chosen, could have visited at the Embassy. The teachers were mean, under-bred, detestable—with one exception.”

Herrick turned sharply and faced her. “Name him,” he said, brusquely, and bluntly, as she herself would have spoken.

“M. Henri Van Zandt, the drawing master,” she said, boldly, defiantly; but, for all that, with a sudden flame in her cheeks, which made them approach in colour to her hair.

“Is that the friend for whom you made your sketch this morning?”

“Yes.”

“And those you have previously made of the Castle and its inhabitants?”

“Yes.”

“Take care, Honor, I may think it necessary to ask my mother to give an eye to your correspondence.”

Honor clapped her hands. “Oh, the very thing!” she cried, “it would be heavenly to feel that one was defying every relative one has in the world! I’ve told father and mother, over and over again, that on the very day I’m one-and-twenty, I’m going over to Brussels to marry M. Van Zandt, and we have had no end of storms over it; but, fancy the exquisite pleasure of holding up a letter to Aunt Jo, and saying, ‘Aunt Jo, I’m going into the village to post this letter

to my dear old drawing master, and by-and-by I'm going to marry him, and together we shall set up a shop on the Montagne de la Cour, for the sale of lead-pencils and artist's colours.' "

" Honor ! "

" Oh, don't draw a long face ! It's my very life to be always 'in the opposition.' I'm a born Nihilist, Democrat, Socialist, whatever you like to call it. Directly a thing is forbidden to me by 'the powers that be,' I find it's the only thing in life worth doing."

Herrick interrupted the girl's light talk with a serious question :

" Tell me what sort of a man is this M. Van Zandt, for whom you are ready to defy every relative you have in the world."

Lady Honor's answer was characteristic.

" When I first saw him I saw only that he was old—over forty, that is—and ugly ; oh, as

ugly as I am, and very badly dressed. After I had tumbled into the water one day, and he had jumped in and saved me, I found out that he had beautiful eyes, and that he was as chivalrous as a knight-errant, and that nothing in the world could suit him so well as his own shabby coats and hats. After this we naturally got on amazingly well together;" she broke off for a moment, then added, "but before this I had won his heart. Shall I tell you how?"

"I am deeply interested, I shall like amazingly to know," answered Herrick.

"Well, it was in class, and the Gorgon-eyes of the teachers were upon us, and we were all silent as mutes. The water-colour class were drawing from a study after Cuyp, a level Dutch meadow with sheep and goats browsing. I was always quicker than the other girls at drawing, and before they were half-way through, my sketch was finished, all except

the faces of my animals, which I left vacant. M. Van Zandt passed once and looked over my shoulder. 'Pourquoi donc, mademoiselle?' he said, pointing to the eyeless, noseless creatures. He didn't say 'Pourquoi donc?' next time he passed, for every one of those creatures had had a face given to it in lead pencil. All the poor little persecuted teachers and pupils in the school figured as sheep, all the mean, tell-taling, underbred pupils and teachers came out as goats. He put the sketch into his pocket at once, and told me that it was worth living his twenty years of cheap teaching over again to see Mademoiselle Dutertre—the head of the school—with a beard and curly horns."

They had now reached the hall-door of the Castle, and Lady Honor, with a look on her face which seemed to say that she considered the last word on M. Van Zandt's perfections had been spoken, disappeared into the house.

CHAPTER X.

So Herrick sailed away in search of his lost darling, leaving affairs, great and small, at Longridge, to settle themselves. It would have been as profitless a task to have stood on the sea-shore and told the tide not to follow as the moon led, as to have attempted to persuade this young lover to stay quietly at home and wait the course of events.

“A fool I may be. I dare say I am,” he said to himself over and over again as he paced the deck of the Atlantic steamer, whose speed was all too slow for his hot haste; “but if I don’t follow this clue, slight though it may be, what in Heaven’s name am I to do? What other course lies open to me?”

It took him three weeks to reach his destination in that out-of-the-way corner of Washington territory, which, not three years back, had been a rank forest, and which now was the site of a busy and well-populated town.

During those three weeks, events followed in a rapid succession at Longridge. The first event of importance was the appointment of a trustee to John Gaskell's will in the place of the one who had died.

It seemed to Mr. McGowan that Lady Joan showed an altogether unaccountable anxiety to get this matter settled.

"It had far better stand over till Mr. Gaskell's return," he remonstrated. "He ought to have a word to say on the matter."

But no. Lady Joan would listen to no remonstrance.

"My son may be away for six months or

more, for all I know to the contrary," she said in that frigid manner of hers, which always made Mr. McGowan feel as if cold water were being poured down his spine; "and, as Lord Southmoor must return to Devon in a week, at the farthest, I think the sooner all legal formalities are got through the better."

The lawyer pricked his ears and took fright at the mention of Lord Southmoor's name.

"If I may offer a suggestion, Lady Joan," he said, speaking out boldly, "Mr. Gaskell is the right and only person who should be nominated co-trustee with Mr. Rothsay."

Lady Joan slightly bowed in acknowledgment of the suggestion; then added, in frigid manner as before, "I shall have the greatest objection to any one, save Lord Southmoor, acting in that capacity."

To this she adhered, and the upshot of it all was, that before Herrick had time to reply

to Mr. McGowan's cablegram, acquainting him with the state of affairs, Lord Southmoor—idea-less and incapable—was bracketed with Mr. Rothsay, eighty years of age and incapable, as trustee to the vast wealth that John Gaskell had left behind.

There could be but little doubt that Lady Joan had her team well in hand now, and could drive it any way she listed.

With the sense of power, however, there seemed to come to her but little of serenity or satisfaction. A spirit of restlessness appeared to have taken possession of her. She rose early, went to bed late, ate little, and from morning till night incessant occupation of some sort seemed to be a necessity to her.

Lady Honor's keen eyes noted all this, together with her aunt's changing personal appearance. "There'll soon not be enough of her left to throw a shadow, Argus," said the

girl, as she fondled the mastiff's big, tawny head and fed him with lumps of sugar with which, surreptitiously, she had stuffed her pockets.

Off and on, Argus was the recipient of a good many of Lady Honor's confidences just then. Life at Longridge, with Lady Joan at one end of the dinner-table and Lord Southmoor at the other, was not a very cheerful affair. Argus seemed to the girl the only bit of honest, cheery, young life about the house, and morning, noon, and night found the two in each other's company. He accompanied her in her walks or rides, and her easel was never seen on terrace or shady walk without Argus's big, brawny form stretched beside it. He was called upon for sympathy on all sorts of matters which might be reasonably supposed to be outside the range of canine taste. For instance, the sketch of his own thick-limbed

self, of which Herrick had caught a glimpse, minus a face, was put literally under his nose, and he was called upon to admire himself, endowed with large, kindly human eyes, very bushy eye-brows, and moustachioed lip.

“It’s the image of him, Argie, and it’s going off to him to-day with a few others,” said the girl as she slipped it into an envelope addressed to :

“M. HENRI VAN ZANDT,
“ 25, Rue Hainault,
“ Bruxelles.”

This despatch evidently was precious in her eyes, for she did not trust it to the Castle letter-bag, but rode herself with it to the village post-office.

By the same post she despatched a less bulky packet to Herrick, to the address at New York to which he had requested his

correspondence to be sent. It was a very informal missive. There was never much beating about the bush in Lady Honor's letters; and in this one, as usual, she dashed into the very middle of her subject without any preamble.

"Father," she wrote, "has suddenly developed an increase of starchiness which is very funny. He is stinging-nettles, chevaux-de-frise, stilts, and high-heels boiled down into essence. I suppose it is because he has been made trustee, or something or other, to Uncle John's will, that his dignity has grown so rapidly. He has tried to sit upon me a good deal lately; but, of course, I never fail to turn the tables, and sit upon him. There's one comfort: he'll soon be out of the house now, for mammy, down in Devon, is crying out for change of quarters. The Sphinx remains impenetrable, as usual, and, although I have kept

my eyes fixed on her, as yet I am a long way off from reading her riddle. We spend long mornings together—they could be measured by the mile. She has recommended to me all sorts of improving books. I take them up, lean back in my chair, hold the book in front of me, and—study her. She writes a great deal. I'm sure she is composing an essay; and I think its subject is Catherine the Second of Russia, for a bulky volume—the life of that beauty—is always beside her on her writing-table; and whenever she has a spare moment I see it in her hand. Now that's a curious subject to take up, isn't it? Here is something else I can't understand. All the law business that has been done during your absence has been got through at express speed, as if business were hateful to her. Mr. McGowan, for some reason or other, does not appear to be a favourite, and he seems no

sooner in the house than he's out of it again. Yet there comes a person to the house—a person, by the way, who has been more than once before—and he is closeted with Aunt Jo for the whole afternoon in the library. I met him coming to the house as I was going down to my favourite seat in the pine wood, early in the afternoon, and when I returned, somewhere about five, I could see him as I passed the library windows seated there still. He's not a bad-looking man. I've dubbed him Adam from the nice, frank, open-air look he has about him. I should think he would look positively handsome divested of his church-going coat, with his shirt-sleeves tucked up, digging up potatoes."

Here there followed a sketch of Ralph Harwood, in shirt sleeves, in the act of potato-digging—a sketch that so cleverly caught his likeness that Herrick could not fail to recog-

nise the man who had on one occasion held open the park gate for him.

"This suits me best," was written as legend beneath the sketch.

The picture absorbed the remainder of her sheet, and crowded into one corner her signature, preceded by the letters Y. A. C., which, in a bracket, she informed Herrick meant "Your affectionate Cousin."

It may be conjectured, however, that could Lady Honor have made a third at the interview which had taken place between Ralph and Lady Joan, she would have modified her opinion respecting the "fine, frank, open-air look" which, in the first instance, had won her admiration. As he sat facing Lady Joan, watching her changes of expression, while she read a letter which he had just put into her hand, his brow was knotted into a deep frown, his face looked white and anxious, his

fingers played nervously with the brim of his hat which he held between his knees.

His changed manner even attracted the attention of Lady Joan, who, naturally enough, attributed it to the serious condition of his sister's health as stated by Dr. Gallagher in the letter she held in her hand.

"I confess I do not understand some of the technical expressions this doctor employs," she said as she laid the letter down; "but it is quite clear to me that he considers your sister's mental condition far from satisfactory."

"Yes, my lady."

"And he lays great stress upon the unfortunate fact of her mother's insanity. 'The disease known as melancholia,' he says, 'is so frequently hereditary.'"

Here she keenly scrutinised Ralph's face.

"Yes, my lady," he answered once more, fidgeting a little under her steady gaze.

“ Well, I can only say I am very glad your priest has given his consent to the only sensible course that could be taken in the matter, and that your sister’s health will be at once and thoroughly attended to. Two hundred a year I think you said was Dr. Gallagher’s charge for receiving her as a patient ? ”

“ Yes, my lady.”

“ As you will have many preliminary expenses, I will pay you the first quarter in advance : fifty pounds that will be. Please remember, however, that I only charge myself with your sister’s maintenance so long as she remains under the care of this doctor.”

The cheque for fifty pounds was made out and handed to Ralph ; but, somehow, he did not appear half so effusively grateful as he had been on a former occasion for a lesser sum.

“Now, with regard to Miss White,” pursued Lady Joan as Ralph folded the cheque and put it into his purse, “her wishes incline to a religious life?”

“So Father Elliot says, my lady. I’ve not seen her; I know nothing about her,” said Ralph, bringing out his words with a jerky rapidity.

“Since that is the case, I will put my offer of the other day into a more definite form. I believe it is usual when a young lady enters a convent for her friends to pay down a certain sum into the convent treasury. I am willing, in this matter, to fulfil the obligations of Miss White’s friends. If your priest or the mother-superior of the convent she wishes to enter will fix the required sum I will pay it: one half on the day she begins her novitiate, the other half on the day she makes her full profession.”

Ralph made no reply to this, so Lady Joan put a direct question to him :

“ Will you kindly convey this offer of mine to your priest ? ”

“ Yes, my lady.”

“ Of course I will like you to send me fullest particulars of the convent the young lady enters, and when and where the novitiate will begin,” resumed the lady ; “ but I think that can very well be done by letter.”

“ Yes, my lady.”

“ Finally—and on this matter I wish you to be very exact—you must make your priest to understand clearly that he can have no direct intercourse with me. All communications to me must be made through you. I have my reasons for wishing this ; but I think it is not necessary to state them to you.”

“ Not necessary ! ” it would have been well-nigh impossible for her to have stated in so

many words her fixed resolve that no ghosts of early days should be resuscitated now to haunt her path and enfeeble her purpose.

Once more there came no response from Ralph, so once more she put a direct question :

“Do you understand me?”

To which Ralph replied, a little brusquely, perhaps :

“I do, my lady.”

“One thing more, and then I think our interview is ended. It concerns your sister. When she has been some little time—say a month—under Dr. Gallagher’s care, I wish to see him and have a *vivâ voce* report of her condition. I have his address, and will write and tell him when it will be convenient for me to receive him. That is all there is to say, I think.”

CHAPTER XI.

ALTHOUGH Herrick had again and again admitted to himself the possibility that Honor's indictment of folly might be a true one, yet, as he made the last stage of his journey—that by rail from New York to Tacoma City—his hopes revived, and all sorts of bright anticipations filled his mind.

He wondered over the first words of the greeting that would pass between him and his darling; what she would be doing in her cousin's home; how she would be looking when he caught his first glimpse of her. Would she be dressed in one of her usual simple white frocks, with a dainty little posy in her waist-belt; and would he see on her finger—

and this thought sent a hot flush of blood to his brow—the ruby ring over whose making he had spent so much time and thought in order that it might be the counterpart of his own?

He lived on the memory of happy meetings and greetings in days gone by, much more than he did on his bread and butter just then; or, in other words, on the hurried meals which the breaks in his railway travelling allowed him. Over and over again he lived through the last hour they had stood face to face together, when, with clasped hands and tears running down her cheeks, she had besought him for permission to watch beside his aged grandfather. Over and over again he lived through “that tick of his lifetime’s one moment of bliss,” when he had held her in his arms under the beeches at Summerhill, and had vowed that “nothing in this world nor in

any other should come between them." Once more the silent, stately avenue, the sea of green-sward with its black blots of shadows, rose up before him, and the sudden sharply-tolling bell sounded in his ears together with Lois's sweet tremulous words of love and trust.

Beautiful delusive visions all of them ! Tacoma city, with its hum of traffic and bustle of money-making, made them all to vanish like ghosts at cock-crowing, and brought him face to face with a long list of "John Whites," which seemed altogether out of proportion to its population.

It took some little time to hunt down the owners of this far from distinctive patronymic, interview them, and convince himself that they were none of them the "John White" of his hopes.

The proverbial search for a needle in a

bundle of hay would have been easy work beside this, which might have been compared rather to a search for a needle in a packet of needles, every one as like another as a needle could well be.

Mr. McGowan's cablegram, conveying the intimation of Lord Southmoor's appointment as co-trustee to John Gaskell's will, found him in the thick of his dreary task. "John White, of 1059, Yakima Avenue. Thomas White, horse dealer, 1090, Market Broadway. He'd be no use. Ah yes, though, he might have a father who might be a John White. I must look him up," he was saying to himself, when the message was brought to him.

He read it a little indifferently. "What on earth is there in that to make a hue and cry over!" he thought. "McGowan must be going off his head to make such a fuss about nothing. It can't matter two straws

whether my uncle or some one else is trustee. He's not a man to trouble himself as to how things go on, and of course, virtually, all responsibility will rest on my shoulders. By and-by, when things are a little more settled"—that meant, when Lois was found and carried back to Longridge as his wife—"I shall have a good deal to think of ; but now——!"

Here he crumpled the cablegram in his hand, tossed it into the fire, and went back to the question whether Thomas White of Market Broadway might have a father who might be the John White of whom he was in search.

Lady Honor's letter, which, in due course, followed the cablegram, perhaps had a little more attention accorded to it for the reason that it was a source of greater annoyance to him—ruffled his temper—made him feel

somewhat as if he had been thrashed with stinging-nettles. When he had given Honor permission to write to him and tell him anything that might transpire concerning Lois, he had not dreamed that she would in this way set up a deliberate system of espionage on his mother. The whole letter, from beginning to end, so to speak, set his teeth on edge with its rough handling of people and things which young girls are supposed to hold in some little reverence. How could it concern Honor, he asked himself angrily, whether his mother studied the life of Catherine of Russia or of anybody else? What had it to do with her or with him that she received the visits of a man, say, of the small farmer class?

The whole tone of the letter seemed to him not only an insult to himself, but, in some sort, an insult to the memory of his father, who, to the last hour of his life, had never

failed to treat Lady Joan with the utmost of respect.

His mother had expressly denied all knowledge of Lois and her movements. To suppose her capable of a series of small deceptions on a matter which had had the most honest and open opposition at her hands, would be to create an entirely new conception of her character. It was far easier for him to let go the favourable estimate he had begun to form of Honor, and to credit her with a malice which, under the mask of a love of fun, ran riot at will. So Lady Honor's letter followed Mr. McGowan's telegram into the fire.

Her next letter shared a similar fate. It was, she said, "only a line to say she had nothing to say," that is, nothing of importance to report, except that the man whom she had before described as Adam had been again to the house. There was a postscript to this

letter, saying that Catherine of Russia had been banished, and her place had been taken by ponderous volumes on ethics by Mill and Bentham. Also, that "Aunt Jo" had given up going to church.

A second postscript followed this. It was to the effect that, as "the Sphinx" was a ponderous and clumsy appellation to write frequently, she would, for the future, substitute the initials "E.N.," which, if Herrick would carry back his thoughts to the day on which he had first shown any amiable feeling towards her, and recall the conversation they had had together in the churchyard, he might understand to mean "embodied nightmare."

This letter did not bring back on its writer a sharp reprimand, for the whole and sole reason that it reached Herrick at a moment when he had a more difficult question to decide than any over which hitherto he had

racked his brain. Scouring the environs of Tacoma in search of his "John Whites," he had lighted on the traces of a man who, there was little doubt, was the one he sought. He had searched out this man's antecedents, and had found that he had come from England about ten years back, that he had spoken from time to time of a cousin of his who was an officer in the navy, and of this cousin's only daughter who was being educated in an orphanage. This man's name was John and his wife's name was Lois, after whom, Herrick conjectured, there could be little doubt that his Lois had been christened.

By profession, this John White was a civil engineer, he had pursued his calling in Tacoma and its environs until about six months back, when professional duties had taken him to California, where he was at the present moment. There could be no difficulty in finding

him out there ; he was a rising and a thriving man, and the laying out of a new railway in the gold country had been committed to his supervision.

The question which Herrick sought to answer now was, should he at this point give up the hope of finding Lois in America, or should he push on to California to her cousin's house?

Was it probable that Lois had known of her cousin's change of locality, and had, in the first instance, made California her destination? or, if not this, had she on arriving at Tacoma, learnt the news for the first time, and thence continued her journey to California?

Either supposition held its full measure of pain for him. It nearly drove him frantic to think of this child—she was little more—setting off without guardian or guide on this second long journey. It was bad enough to

picture her crossing the Atlantic alone ; but that was safety itself compared with the perils her infantine face and sweet, timid ways would seem to invite in a journey of this sort across country.

His hopes sank very low ; he began almost to feel that, after all, Honor was right, and his journey to the West had been but a fool's errand.

Yet if Lois had not taken refuge here with her only relatives, where in Heaven's name had she gone ? And if he decided at this point to give up the pursuit of those relatives, what else in Heaven's name was he to do ?

It was a difficult question to answer. It took him hours of weary thought before he even approached a decision. He almost regretted that he had not in the first instance called professional skill to his aid. Yet he acknowledged to himself this was scarcely a

thing which, in the circumstances, he had had a right to do. If a girl throws her lover over, and bids him respect her hiding-place, he has scarcely the right to hunt her down as if she were a criminal.

These, and a thousand other thoughts crowding into his mind, made his decision yet more difficult to arrive at.

It was arrived at at last, however, by help of a night without sleep, a day without food.

To follow this American clue to its end was the one and only thing he could see before him now. This done, other things might suggest themselves; but this thing left undone, he could see nothing before him but a blank wall.

So he turned his back on Tacoma city, and set off for the Far West, with his heart more like a lump of lead than the living, beating thing it was supposed to be.

CHAPTER XII.

WINTER set in early that year. Before the roaring east winds had finished sweeping avenue and byways of their autumn wreckage, the ice season was upon them: great jewels of icicles hung from slanting roofs and corniced windows, and frost spangles were flung galore over field and forest.

Lady Joan seemed to feel the cold this winter as she had never done before. She took no out-door exercise; was never seen without some woollen wrap over her shoulders; and shut herself up as much as possible in her boudoir, which she averred was the only warm room in the house.

Lady Honor, on the contrary, rejoiced in the keen, bracing air and iron-bound earth, which rang out a defiance to every step she put upon it, as young things in full health are apt to rejoice in all that sets the blood dancing. Her one lament was that there was no one to skate with, no one to slide with, no one to toboggan with. In fact, just then there appeared to be no one to do anything at all with. The society which the neighbourhood offered had never had much attraction for Lady Joan ; and her acquaintance with her neighbours had consequently been kept upon a strictly formal footing. A call at informal hours, a chance guest at breakfast or luncheon were things unknown at the Castle ; and, of necessity, entertainments of every sort were for the present tabooed to Lady Joan and her niece.

Lord Southmoor had returned to Devon, and was supposed to be preparing to take

flight with his "Lily" to the South. A good deal of correspondence, however, appeared to be going on just then between him and Lady Joan, for every other day seemed to bring a letter with the Southmoor post-mark on it.

Lady Honor wondered over this as well as over one or two other matters. She had plenty of time for wondering. Deprived by the frost of her morning's wild gallop across country, in company with Argus, having no taste for music, and ignoring utterly the existence of such tools as needles and thimbles, she had a great many spare moments on her hands. These she devoted in their entirety to minute observation of the details of the life being lived out beside her own.

"She doesn't know she's under a microscope, eh Argie, does she?" she whispered, as she fed the mastiff with the best of everything she could lay hands upon. "Time will show;

but if I don't read the riddle of the Sphinx, there's no one else will, take my word for it, Argie ! ”

In those early winter days, when Lady Joan was thrown so much upon her niece for society, slowly, but inevitably, it was borne in upon her mind that this girl, upon whom she had counted as a passive, if not active, coadjutor in her plans, was a failure and a disappointment. “Give it a chance and blood must show,” she had said to herself over and over again, as she had tried to balance Lady Honor's numerous disadvantages of education against her name and her race. But assuredly “blood ” was having every chance now under her own austere and stately rule, and yet Honor remained the untrained, defiant, care-for-nothing damsel she had been from her cradle.

Nothing daunted her, nothing troubled her.

The sternest of looks or of reprimands left as little mark upon her as rain upon a rivulet. Lady Joan, who had known so well how to freeze the boldest into silence with an "I beg your pardon," found herself more than once cowed and discomfited by one of Honor's steady, fixed looks from her bright, prominent eyes.

In spite of all this, however, Lady Joan found it impossible in a moment to give up the plans it had taken her so many years to mature. Let Honor be loud-voiced, disappointing, disconcerting as she might, she ranked infinitely higher in her estimation than the little nursery governess, with her face of child-angel and voice soft and musical as a woodland echo.

She lost no opportunity of rousing interest in Honor's mind in Herrick and his doings, and of setting before the girl, in a right light,

this foolish trip of his across the Atlantic, and the foolish fancy which had occasioned it.

“I’ve had a line from Herrick—simply a line,” she said, looking up from her correspondence at her niece, who sat facing her in a rocking-chair with a book in her hand.

“Indeed!” said Lady Honor, sharply, “he might have had the grace to write to me.”

She felt a little piqued that the long letters she had taken such trouble to write had not had so much as an acknowledgment.

Lady Joan, not understanding, rejoiced in the thought that the cousins had reached a stage of friendliness in which correspondence might be expected of each other.

“He is in a disturbed state of mind, just now,” she said, apologetically; “by-and-by, no doubt, he will settle down into his old self and do all that is expected of him. If you’ll

believe it, he is off to California now on his wild-goose chase ! ”

Lady Honor gave a great start. She fell back on her old form of expression. “ Oh, what a fool he is ! ” she exclaimed, brusquely, as before.

Lady Joan slightly frowned. The form of expression was not to her liking—the sentiment was.

“ He has been befooled, I’ll admit,” she said, after a moment’s pause ; “ but I’ve no doubt that by-and-by he’ll return in a saner state of mind. It is better for him to have a lost journey than a ruined life.”

“ Aunt Joan,” said Honor, suddenly fixing her round, prominent eyes full upon her aunt, “ what makes you think that it will be a lost journey ? Why shouldn’t he find Lois White in her cousin’s house in America ? ”

There could be no doubt about it, the

question embarrassed Lady Joan. Her eyes drooped, her face clouded.

“It is a matter of common-sense,” she said, after a moment’s pause, “that an all but penniless girl is scarcely likely to undertake such a long and expensive journey at a moment’s notice.”

Then she took up her pen and began to write rapidly across one of the quarto sheets which lay before her.

Lady Honor, still eyeing her keenly, saw that her hand trembled slightly. “She knows where the girl is if any one in creation does,” she said to herself, as she pushed back her rocking-chair and walked lazily to the window, triumphant in the thought that she had given Aunt Jo a shock to her nerves, and resolute to repeat the operation on the first opportunity.

Acres of frosty grass, bare, brown-limbed

trees—showing black against a leaden sky—met her eye. The only sign of life in the sunless, wintry landscape was the appearance of two men coming up the long avenue which led to the house.

One of the two she immediately recognised as a former visitor of Lady Joan's. His companion appeared to be a man about a dozen or so years older. His figure was narrow and sinuous, his face dark-skinned and lean.

"Here is Adam," she thought to herself. "I wonder if he's bringing the serpent with him." Aloud, she said: "Delightful! Aunt Joan, here are visitors. Oh, what a heavenly break in the day's monotony!"

Lady Joan frowned, but said nothing. Her pen steadily travelled over her quarto sheet. "Standards of Morality Compared and Differentiated," stood as the title of that sheet. Below, she had started her essay with the

words: "What is the criterion of a moral act?"

The answer to this question held a deeper interest for her than the coming of chance guests to the house, to bore her with their commonplaces of sympathy or gossip.

Honor's steady, fixed eyes seemed to read her thoughts easily enough.

"Houses—castles especially—should be made with drawbridges, shouldn't they, Aunt Joan? Cards to be left on the other side of the moat," she said, with the slightest possible touch of sarcasm in her tone.

"Dr. Gallagher and Mr. Harwood wish to see you, my lady," said a servant entering the room at that moment.

The expression on Lady Joan's face changed. She, however, carefully crossed her final "t" before she said, composedly:

"Honor, will you kindly take your book

into another room ? These persons have come to see me on business.”

Lady Honor immediately vanished. She did not take her book with her, however, and, instead of retiring to the library or drawing-room, went straight to her own room, where she made an excuse for the attendance of the young girl who had been assigned to her as maid.

She thought she would like to know a little about this Dr. Gallagher and Mr. Harwood.

Amid a variety of directions as to dresses, ribbons, and hats, she put a few questions to the girl which elicited from her, in reply, the story of Lucy Harwood's short stay in the house, and of her sleep-walking propensities. A story which, with slight variations of detail, was now current in the household.

Lady Honor's curiosity was excited.

"Did any one see her walking about in her night-gown beside Lady Joan?" she asked. "I should love to see some one walking in their sleep in the dead of night."

Most ladies'-maids, thus catechised, would forthwith have begun to build a fabric of fiction on the foundation of fact. This one, lacking imagination, was truthful.

"I don't know, my lady. I've heard say that she walked into old Mr. Gaskell's sick-room in the dead of night; but I don't know if it was true. Mrs. Parsons, the old gentleman's attendant, or Mrs. Jervis, the sick nurse, could have told you; but they're neither of them here now."

"What has become of them?"

"Oh, my lady has been so kind to them. Mrs. Jervis had a son out in Australia, and wanted to go out to him; so my lady paid her

passage out for her. And Mrs. Parsons had a nephew who wanted to open a big shop in the grocery line in Chester, and my lady has set him up there, and Mrs. Parsons lives with him. My lady has been goodness itself to every one who showed old Mr. Gaskell any kindness or attention."

Lady Honor felt puzzled. Her aunt's conduct seemed to her more enigmatical than ever. "Goodness itself to every one who was kind to the old gentleman," she thought. "Yet father has more than once said that she had wished him out of the world for years! It is all a mystery together!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE short winter's day began to wane. Lady Honor bethought her of a certain letter which she had written, with all but frozen fingers that morning, before the fire in her room had been lighted, and which now reposed in her locked-up desk awaiting postage.

The two hours which intervened between afternoon tea and dressing for dinner were the hours she generally held sacred to the posting of these precious missives. Those two hours were more absolutely her own than any other in the day; for Lady Joan, as a rule, retired to her room after the tea-drinking was over, and Honor was left free for the two miles walk which landed her in the village post-office.

Lady Joan had specially requested her niece

never to be seen outside the lodge gates unattended by her maid; and Lady Honor had forthwith made the discovery that long country walks were only delightful when undertaken with Argus for sole attendant.

Lady Joan hitherto had forborne to question Honor respecting those walks. She was ignorant of the steady correspondence which her niece carried on with her Belgian lover. M. van Zandt's existence had only been made known to her by the casual remark of Lord Southmoor's—that "A presumptuous jackanapes of a drawing-master had presumed to make love to Honor; but, of course, it was all at an end now." Lady Honor's long, lonely walks to her mind simply represented a breach of the conventional; and, for the present, she shrank from a contention on the matter—a contention which, no doubt, Honor would have welcomed with keen delight.

“So far, Argus, I have paraded my muddy boots before her to no purpose; but, sooner or later, the storm must burst, and we shall have the opportunity of saying no end of sweet things to each other,” said the girl, as she and Argus, side by side, scampered down the lanes which lay rutted and frozen between high hedges sparsely powdered with light snow.

Argus had sadly plebeian tastes, and owned to a good many canine friends among the village-bred lurchers and collies, and when, after posting her letter, Lady Honor started on her return journey, he was nowhere to be seen. She whistled and whistled in vain for him; then lost her temper over his bad manners, and informed the rutted ground and snow-powdered hedges that she would teach him a lesson and leave him to his fate.

The sun had gone down—a white-faced,

miserable apology for the great golden globe of summer days—twilight was yielding rapidly to the denser shades of night when she reached the miniature pine wood which made the short cut from the high road to the Castle. The moon had not yet risen ; never so much as one tiny silver star pierced the blackish-grey of the sky. The pines swayed a little in a gentle passing wind and waved their funereal plumes hither and thither as Lady Honor clambered over the rustic gate : to her way of thinking a far nicer way of entering the little wood than by lifting the latch and walking in. The bridle-path, cleanly swept by the gardeners every morning, showed whitely between two rows of trimly-cut *Euonymus* bushes grown to nearly a foot above her head.

It did not for a moment occur to the girl that it might have been wiser to have taken the longer road through the park to the Castle until

the sound of footsteps and voices approaching attracted her attention.

“Gipsies, tramps, poachers. All three, perhaps,” she said to herself. “Now, are they following the path, or are they careering here, there, everywhere under the pines?”

The steady, rapid pace at which the footsteps were approaching answered her question. In the tangle of undergrowth which lay right and left of the cleanly-swept path, that regular ringing tread would have been an impossibility.

Full of the idea of tramps or vagabonds, Lady Honor took advantage of a break in the hedge, and slipped out of the path into the tangle beneath the pines.

She congratulated herself that her dress was a black one. “If only my hair matched it!” she sighed. “It will shine out like fireflies in

the dark. I rather wish Argus were here, he'd help me to save my watch and rings."

But the next moment found her thanking Heaven that Argus was not there to betray her with his loud challenging "who goes there?" bark, for strange words fell upon her ear—words so strange, indeed, that she held in her breath and shrank behind the biggest pine-trunk she could find, in order that not one of them should be lost to her.

"What on earth are you in the dumps about, man?" said an oleaginous voice, which Lady Honor felt sure must belong to the dark-skinned man whom, in a moment of inspiration, she had dubbed "the serpent," and who had been announced to Lady Joan as Dr. Gallagher. "This is a capital world to live in if only one knows how to manage one's affairs. Cheer up! cheer up! Everything is going splendidly!"

"Splendidly, do you call it?" replied the

other, whom it was easy to identify as Ralph Harwood. "Villainously would be a better word. I've never before played cat's-paw to man or woman, and I wish to Heaven I had let myself go into the workhouse rather than ——"

"Oh, if you're going to be religious and invoke Heaven," interrupted the other, the oil in his voice giving place to a pronounced sneer, "go down on your knees and thank Heaven for the golden chance that has come in your way. Why, my friend, the lady is as free with her fifty-pound notes as other people are with their fives!"

"I wish to goodness they had never come in my way," said Ralph, gloomily. "Why couldn't she get some one else to do her bidding? Why does she persist in throwing her gold at me in the way she does?"

The men were now abreast of Lady Honor

in her hiding-place. A sudden determination came to her. These men had been closeted with Lady Joan for hours, and were no doubt in her confidence. Here, perhaps, was a golden chance of getting a clue to the secret for which Herrick was hunting the other hemisphere. Softly she crept out of her hiding-place, and as the men passed along, step by step, her tread followed theirs.

Only the thick Euonymus hedge divided her from them ; their words fell clear and distinct upon her ear.

“ I take it,” said Gallagher, “ that the lady hasn’t always had the chance of flinging gold about in this fashion, and that’s perhaps why she’s a little free with it now. She’s a splendid woman—a most interesting case I should have called her if I had come upon her, in the old days, in one of the asylums—a little difficult to understand at first, perhaps ; but a keen pair

of eyes like mine will read her through and through before they've done with her."

"If your eyes are so keen, I wish to goodness you'd tell me what makes her take so violent an interest in me and mine. It is out of all reason to volunteer as she does to provide for my sister for life."

"Gently, my friend, you go too fast. She will provide for her only so long as she is treated as a semi-lunatic; in other words, she makes it to your interest and mine to stamp her as such."

"Of course, so far as Miss White is concerned," went on Ralph, "it is easy enough to understand why she should wish to hide her in a convent. I've heard lately that it was the talk of the place that young Mr. Gaskell wanted to marry her."

Lady Honor's heart was beating wildly now. Here was a revelation! She began impetu-

ously to thank Heaven that the plot was laid bare to her before it was too late to frustrate it.

“Let me see,” said the other, after a moment’s pause, “when did the novitiate begin—on the twentieth of last month was it?”

Lady Honor’s heart stood still. She ceased to thank Heaven. The novitiate begun! Alas, alas! for Herrick’s hopes. Lady Joan might almost cry victory now.

“On the twentieth of last month, yes,” answered Ralph, “and a strict novitiate it is, too. In all respects similar to the life of the fully professed nun—perpetual enclosure, no communication whatever with the outer world. Not even deeds of charity are allowed; it is all contemplation and prayer. Great Heavens. How can the women endure it! I’d sooner lie down in my grave at once than become a Red Sister.”

"Oh, well, that's their look-out, isn't it? She went in willingly enough, didn't she?"

"Willingly! She was only too thankful to be admitted. The Father would never have allowed her to be driven in."

"What's her name in religion, by the way? It's just as well I should know," asked Gallagher.

"Sister Héloïse. Not that it matters much to anybody what her name is! In these strict orders the novice is as dead to the world as the nun."

This was not to be all that Honor was to hear that night. This wily, dark-skinned Gallagher, whose every sentence she felt ought to end in a hiss, was to be the first to put into plain words the thought which had been lying in her heart for weeks past.

"I say, Ralph," he said, in a knowing tone, "it strikes me this Lady Joan has something

on her mind; her manner gives one that impression. On her conscience, I should say, if I had not long ago come to the conclusion that conscience was nothing more than prejudices for or against certain social conventions, transmitted in a straight line from father to son."

"I don't know about what she has on her conscience, I know she has put something on mine——"

"Tush, man, don't whine!" interrupted Gallagher, the oiliness in his voice having given place now to a more natural, if rougher, intonation. "This woman is to me a most interesting psychological study. Depend upon it, before I've done with her, I shall read her as easily—well, as I've read the score or so of patients who have passed through my hands."

They had now reached a point in the bridle-path where the pines were less closely planted,

and where the Euonymus hedge was considerably lower. Lady Honor dared not venture farther, the risk of detection was too great. So the men walked on ahead, free from her espionage. Though she strained her ears to the utmost, only a half-sentence of Gallagher's reached them. It was :

“For one thing, whether by fair means or foul, young Mr. Gaskell must be kept out of the way. If he comes upon the scene he'll be sure to spoil sport.”

And a minute after, together with the creak of the little rustic gate which led into the high road, she could hear Ralph saying, in hard, bitter tones :

“Yes, I suppose you're right ; there's no going back for me now.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE sound of the men's footsteps on the frosty road died away in the distance, and the silence of the winter twilight fell upon the pine-wood once more.

Lady Honor pushed back her hat from her hot brows ; her thoughts for the moment all one wild turmoil.

She almost felt that she had heard too much. When she had vowed, in characteristic language, to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, she had not expected to light upon such a solution as this.

Lois, no doubt through Lady Joan's instrumentality, in a convent ; Herrick, " whether by fair means or foul," to be kept out of the

way until certain things, no doubt in train now, should be accomplished. These things held the foreground of her thoughts. Side by side with these, it seemed to her of little consequence that Lucy Harwood, of whom she knew next to nothing, should be placed as a semi-lunatic under a doctor's care, or that Lady Joan should be suspected of having something on her conscience—it had not as yet dawned upon her what a fearful “something” that might be.

Her first impulse was to hasten home, confront Lady Joan with the facts of which she had become possessed, speak her mind freely on the matter, and demand the name of the convent where Lois was located, in order to send it to Herrick.

Second thoughts checked the indignant impulse, and counselled prudence. This was no light skirmish of her own in which she was engaged, a skirmish such as those she had

fought, over and over again, with her Belgian school-mistress on behalf of some oppressed governess-pupil ; but a battle, the issue of which involved a man's life-long happiness. One false step, a note of alarm sounded in Lady Joan's ear, and she felt that she might as well lay down her weapons and strike her flag at once.

For the first time in her life she began to feel a distrust of her own powers, and her need of a counsellor. Yet, where was she to turn for one ? It was self-evident that it was of first importance to get Herrick informed of the condition of things. Next in order came the imperative necessity for discovering the convent where Lois was hidden, so that Herrick, on his return, might lose no time in bringing pressure to bear to induce her to renounce the religious life. "A novice is not a nun," said the girl to herself, trying to re-

kindle hope in her heart, "and there may yet be a chance for Herrick's future."

It was easy enough for her to say "that it was of first importance to get Herrick informed of the condition of things"; but how was this to be done, if Lady Joan were as determined as Gallagher was to keep him away from Longridge, and chose to withhold his address? He had been on the point of starting for California when he had last written, so Lady Joan had said that morning; it stood to reason, therefore, that letters sent to the old address at New York might lie for weeks unclaimed.

Once more she anathematised his rampant folly, not only in fleeing from the spot where his presence was most needed, but also in placing such implicit trust in his mother that he made her his sole correspondent, and the depositary of his confidences.

Her thoughts naturally enough flew to M. Van Zandt as a likely person through whom to make enquiries as to the convents in England belonging to the Red Sisters, and thus, perhaps, get a clue to Lois's hiding-place. She knew something about these Red Sisters; they had several convents in Belgium, and it occurred to her that if not in England, Lois might have perhaps been sent to one of these for her novitiate. The Sisterhood, she had heard, was one of the strictest of the contemplative orders. "Redemptoristines, or Nuns of the Most Holy Redeemer," was their proper designation; but the red tunic which the Sisters habitually wore had won for them colloquially the term Gallagher had used. Their vows included one of perpetual enclosure, and the nuns, she knew well enough, were as much cut off from the world as if the grave had received them.

While these thoughts in swift succession had been passing through her brain, she had remained standing among the shadows of the gloomy pines. Now the rapidly-increasing darkness began to warn her that she must hasten home if she did not wish a bevy of servants with lanterns sent out in search of her.

She shuddered as she thought of what she was returning to; daily intercourse and companionship with Lady Joan in the future seemed to her intolerable, for ever so short a period.

“How can I eat with her, breathe the same air, look her in the face, even, without telling her that I know of her wickedness, and am doing my best to thwart it?” she thought, as her feet carried her as swiftly as possible over the frozen tangle of the pine wood.

In her present frame of mind she felt that it would be impossible for her to sit down to

dinner with Lady Joan that night. She would, she thought, make some excuse, shut herself up in her room for the remainder of the evening, write her letters respectively to Herrick and M. Van Zandt, and carefully consider what, in Herrick's interests—in the interests of truth and righteousness, she might say—it behoved her to do.

It was characteristic of her fearless, careless temperament, that she did not give a thought to the possibility of Lady Joan having discovered her absence from the house, and the sharp reprimand which might even now be awaiting her return.

She made no attempt to enter by any but the big front entrance, where, necessarily, she had to ring for admission. The Castle was shuttered and lighted from top to bottom.

As she entered, the butler greeted her solemnly, with the intimation that the dressing

bell had sounded twenty minutes ago; and half-way across the hall a footman came forward to say that "my lady" wished to speak with her in the library.

Lady Honor at once turned her steps thither. Only yesterday, if she had received such an intimation as this, she would have clapped her hands and cried, "Glorious! Now for a pitched battle!" To-day, however, she was in a frame of mind to which pitched battles seemed tiresome things. Side by side with the story of Herrick's luckless love-making, everything else in life seemed for the moment to be of "colossal insignificance."

Coming in fresh from the keen, frosty air, the temperature of the library seemed to Lady Honor stifling—suited rather to the exigencies of orchids than those of human beings. Nevertheless, there sat Lady Joan as usual cowering

over the fire, her feet absolutely resting on the brass "dogs" which supported the big logs.

The lights of the room were turned very low, but the leaping, crackling flames of the logs threw a bright glow on Lady Joan's pale face and stately figure. She was already dressed for dinner, her black ostrich fan lay beside her on a chair.

"How is this, Honor?" she said, in a stern voice, and fixing a severe look on the girl's hat and coat. "You surely do not need to be told that I disapprove of young girls taking lonely walks at this hour! Please explain."

Lady Honor laughed lightly.

"There isn't much to explain, Aunt Joan. I had letters—no, one letter—that I particularly wished to post myself, so I went to the village post-office to do so. Argus,

who was with me, went off, paying calls on his acquaintance. I hunted after him, and consequently came in later than usual."

It cost the girl something to take the matter thus lightly. She was in a solemn frame of mind, and if she had not put steady restraint on herself, must have turned questioner, and faced her aunt with a few pointed questions which Lady Joan might have found difficult to answer.

"Later than usual!" repeated Lady Joan, in amazement; "Are you in the habit of taking your letters—no, I beg your pardon, one letter—to the post-office in this extraordinary fashion?"

"Do you call it extraordinary?" again laughed Honor. "I see nothing extraordinary in being specially careful over letters to a special correspondent."

"She will make me fight," thought the

girl, "so the sooner we get it over and be done with it the better."

"A special correspondent!" repeated Lady Joan, arching her brows. "Will you be good enough to inform me who he or she may be?"

"Oh, certainly, with a great deal of pleasure. He is M. Van Zandt, my late drawing master, the gentleman to whom I am engaged to be married."

"You—engaged to be married to a drawing master!"

Lady Honor ought to have felt herself annihilated by the voice and manner in which these words were said. No shade of embarrassment, however, showed on her frank, careless face. She only said with a slight touch of irritability:

"Oh, Aunt Joan, don't repeat every word I say in that fashion. It was stupid of father

not to have told you all about it when he was here, it would have saved me such a lot of trouble."

Lady Joan drew a long breath. "I can scarcely credit my hearing, that is why I require your words to be said twice over. Now I think over it, I remember your father said something about some impertinent advances——"

"Stop!" said Honor, going close to her aunt, and taking off her hat that she might feel the steady fixed stare of her bright eyes, "no one in my hearing shall speak disrespectfully of M. Van Zandt. He did me an honour—it was no impertinence when he made me an offer of marriage."

The girl's spirit was thoroughly aroused now. It was with difficulty that she prevented herself adding, as a sequel to her defence of her lover, "You! you! who have

been, and are doing on the sly, all sorts of wicked things; how dare you throw scorn on a man like M. Van Zandt?"

Lady Joan's eyes for a moment drooped under Honor's bright ones. Then she rose, with great dignity, from her chair.

"I will not permit you to discuss this matter with me, Honor, in this or any other fashion," she said, with slow emphasis. "But I warn you, I shall take what steps I deem right and necessary to protect a headstrong girl from her own folly. Meantime I must insist that so long as you remain under my roof you make no more extraordinary excursions into the village at extraordinary hours, not even to post letters to M. Van Zandt, your late drawing master."

It was impossible for Lady Honor to ignore the sarcastic emphasis with which the final words were spoken.

She made a little curtsey by way of acknowledgment for them, then turned towards the door.

“Thank you, Aunt Joan,” she said, lightly, as before. “I’m glad to be dismissed. And please don’t expect me down to dinner to-night. I’m rather tired, and I have a good deal to think of, and another letter to write to M. Van Zandt. Oh, and one to Herrick also, if you’ll be good enough to give me his address.”

As she said this, her bright, round eyes fixed themselves full upon Lady Joan’s white lids once more.

Again those white lids drooped, and there fell a moment of silence. Then Lady Joan recovered herself, and Honor had the answer she might have expected. It was :

“Bring your letter to me when it is written, and I will enclose it in mine. I

have not Herrick's letter at hand at the moment."

"Thank you, it doesn't matter," answered Honor, curtly, as she left the room, regretting now that she had drawn her aunt's attention to her wish to correspond with Herrick, since it might possibly strike a note of warning.

Her correspondence that night kept her pen in her hand till past midnight. In spite of her late hours, however, a letter to M. Van Zandt was dropped by her own hand into the village post-office before breakfast the next morning.

Her letter to Herrick could not be so easily disposed of. How was she to get at his address, she wondered, for she knew it would be useless to approach her aunt again on the matter. The possibility that he might have written to Mr. Champneys, or the lawyer, Mr.

McGowan, suggested itself, and she forthwith resolved at once to make inquiries of both these gentlemen.

“I dare say it will set them both wondering what’s up between Aunt Jo and me, that I can’t go direct to her for my information,” she thought; “but that won’t matter much, so long as I can get tidings to Herrick of his poor little sweetheart.”

CHAPTER XV.

NEARLY a week of warfare between aunt and niece followed. Lady Honor, when she found that she was, as she would have phrased it, "in for it," carried on the skirmishing with unflagging energy.

Her mental attitude towards her aunt, during the early part of that week at any rate, was one of anger more than slightly tinged with contempt. Later on, perhaps, when the secret of a dark night's work would be brought to light, horror and pity might take the place of that anger and contempt; but for the present her feeling was simply one of scornful anger at being brought to book for an infringement

of the conventional by one who, there could be little doubt, was trampling under foot the first principles of truth and honour.

On the day after Lady Honor's late afternoon ramble, Lady Joan greeted her with the information that she had written to Lord Southmoor, telling him of what she was pleased to call Honor's discreditable correspondence. Also to M. Van Zandt, asking him to inform her of the exact position in which he considered he stood towards her niece; and at the same telling him that a matrimonial engagement between him and Lady Honor could in no circumstances receive the sanction of her family.

"I have deemed it my duty to do this, Honor," she said, in conclusion; "for during your father's absence from England I stand in his place towards you."

"With a difference," replied Honor,

promptly, "for my father, so far as I am concerned, has never deemed anything his duty. But write away, Aunt Joan—a dozen letters if you like—to M. Van Zandt; they won't have much effect after the one I sent him yesterday."

The next battle was fought two days later, when M. Van Zandt's letter in reply to Lady Joan's was received.

"I will read it to you, Honor, if you like," said Lady Joan, coldly, formally. "He writes like a gentleman——"

"Why, of course, how could he write in any other fashion? That is equivalent to saying he has written with his fingers, not with his toes," interrupted Honor; "and as for reading it to me, there is not the slightest necessity to do so, I could tell you word for word what he has said."

Lady Joan arched her eyebrows. "I can-

not credit such a thing," she replied, formally, as before.

"I will prove it to you," said Lady Honor, defiantly. "He begins with saying that you have written to him under a misapprehension; that no engagement whatever exists between us, for I am too young to be allowed to have an opinion on so momentous a matter. Is it not so?"

Lady Joan slightly bowed in affirmation.

"He goes on to say," Honor continued, "that had his landscape-painting been successful, and brought in the gold, he would not have looked upon a marriage with an English Earl's daughter in the light of a *mésalliance*, for he comes of a long line of nobles — has, in fact, some of the best blood of old Flanders in his veins, although the terrible wars in the Low Countries have utterly deprived his family of their fortune and position. Is it not so?"

Again Lady Joan bowed assent, and turned over the last page of M. Van Zandt's letter, as if to check by it Lady Honor's farther statements.

"Of course I know what he has written," laughed the girl, noting the action. "He has said all this nonsense to me over and over again. And now I suppose he ends as he began, by saying, that these things being so, he will not allow me to consider myself affianced to him, although once, in a moment of excitement, he suffered himself to speak words of love to me."

Lady Joan closed M. Van Zandt's letter.

"Honor, will you be good enough to tell me what was that moment of excitement?" she asked, in a tone that seemed to imply she dreaded lest some indignity had been done to the family name.

"Oh, certainly. It was nothing much. I

fell into the canal just outside our school one day ; I should have been drowned—not that that would have mattered much to anybody—if M. Van Zandt, who was just coming out of the house, hadn't jumped in and dragged me out. When I came to I was very grateful ; and from that day forward we've been engaged."

"An engagement contracted under such conditions——" began Lady Joan.

Lady Honor sharply interrupted her.

"Oh, Aunt Joan, we'll continue the discussion to-morrow, if you don't mind. I must save this post to Henri, and scold him well for the ridiculous letter he has sent you."

And forthwith she had flown to her room, and there and then had dashed off a most characteristic epistle to M. Van Zandt. The first page consisted of a series of bluntly-put questions, thus :

Did he wish to make her tell falsehoods by

the square yard? Had he forgotten the times without number that she had assured him of her unalterable intention of spending the day after her twenty-first birthday in his mother's house? Did he absolutely intend to ignore the wish she had so often expressed of writing her name and title in full over a small shop on the Montagne de la Cour, devoted to the sale of lead-pencils and artists' colours? If, however, the truth was that he wished to wash his hands of her because she was so ugly and so poor, why not say so at once to her, and be done with it, instead of writing high-flown epistles to her relatives?

On the next page she dropped the interrogative form for the imperative, and desired him to give up his romantic notions, and listen to the dictates of his common-sense.

The third page was less closely written, containing merely the simple words :

“Without you, my Henri, I haven’t a friend in the world.”

Over leaf there followed a postscript, begging him to let her have the result of his enquiries respecting the convents of the Red Sisters as speedily as possible, and entreating him to suggest any ways and means for discovering where Sister Héloïse was located that might occur to him.

While Lady Honor awaited a reply to this, she received letters respectively from Mr. McGowan and Mr. Champneys, in answer to her request for Herrick’s address.

The gist of both letters was pretty much the same. The lawyer’s letter was couched in a slightly injured, indignant tone. He knew nothing of Mr. Gaskell’s movements, he said, for he had not once written to him, although he, Mr. McGowan, had over and over again written to his New York address,

directing his attention to important matters of business.

The reply from Mr. Champneys was to the effect that no necessity for communicating with Mr. Gaskell had arisen since he had left Longridge, all business details having been thoroughly arranged by him before starting; and that if he—Mr. Champneys—had wished to refer any matter to Mr. Gaskell, he would have sent to the Castle for his address, taking it for granted that Lady Joan would be kept informed by him of his movements.

Lady Honor's hopes fell as she read these letters. The fact of Mr. McGowan's letters remaining unacknowledged seemed to imply that letters addressed to Herrick at New York were not forwarded to him. Her course did not seem plain to her now. She looked angrily at the Castle letter-box, which she felt sure would sooner or later become the

depository of letters to Herrick from his mother, and all sorts of wild schemes for rifling it filled her brain. In her present frame of mind she felt herself equal to the doing of deeds she would have scorned at another time. It was an altogether new experience for her to find herself in a dilemma in which her usual weapons of courage and straightforwardness availed her nothing.

Towards the end of that week the warfare between aunt and niece began to slacken. Lady Joan was the first to show signs of flagging. Lady Honor, on the principle that a battle once begun should be fought out to its bitter end, made one or two vigorous efforts to arouse her aunt's evidently waning courage by pointed allusions to the wars which had, in times past, devastated the Netherlands, and to the terrible manner in

which certain noble families had suffered through them.

Lady Joan did not take up the gauntlet. She had suddenly grown distrait, self-absorbed, pre-occupied. To Honor's fancy, she looked like one trying to think out a matter beyond her capabilities, or endeavouring to carry on two trains of thought at the same moment. Whether rightly or wrongly, Lady Honor attributed her aunt's suddenly changed manner to a second visit from the man whom she had dubbed "the serpent." She looked impatiently at the closed library door, behind which sat Lady Joan and "the serpent" in close confabulation.

"If those panels could speak, a fine tale of wickedness I should hear," she said to herself, racking her brain to think of a hiding-place in the room, where in the interests of truth and justice, she could secrete herself,

and so, perhaps, get hold of a thread that might help her to unravel the tangle of evil-doing by which she felt herself to be surrounded.

The very air, to her fancy, seemed charged with wickedness of some mysterious kind. Daily life at the Castle might be flowing on as smoothly as ever ; there, nevertheless, seemed to her, an under-current to it—an under-current of something strange, unknown, inexplicable—close to her eyes, yet she could not see it, close to her hand, and yet for the life of her she could not grasp it.

END OF VOL. II.

21

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 084217071